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WHEN URBAN EDUCATION MEETS COMMUNITY ACTIVISM:
A CASE OF STUDENT EMPOWERMENT IN NEW ORLEANS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Urban Studies

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December 2002

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ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic study of urban education and community development in the city of New Orleans. In New Orleans, as in all American cities, the public schools are at the center of local politics and the policies that affect community life. Institutions of public education have come under fire for failing to prepare youth to compete in the global economy. This is particularly true in urban communities, where schools serve a higher proportion of students of color facing greater incidences of poverty, underemployment and economic distress. As education policymakers and business leaders look to improve education, many of the solutions put forth to reform schools focus on meeting state standards and instituting high stakes testing. A group of educators, community activists, artists, and young people in New Orleans have taken a different approach.

By combining classroom learning with social action, the individual and collective empowerment of students serves as the focus of Students at the Center, a program designed by a writing teacher and his students, that operates within the public school system. Through community-based study on environmental, public health, neighborhood development issues, young people in the Students at the Center program begin to see the learning process, and the product of their education as tools for equitable social change through research, writing, youth media, and social action. This research examines the ways that taking part in community collaborations that emphasize local history, a sense of place, and the struggle for social justice affects students, teachers and residents as they strive to make education accountable to community concerns.

PREFACE

Public schools are under a societal microscope. Every community in the nation is affected by the pressure to raise the standards of public education to meet the mandates of state policy and the American ethos for excellence. In political arenas everyone from would-be county commissioners to presidential candidates talk about improving public schools and the need to better educate today's youth. But in cities with large school systems, strained economies, and ethnically diverse populations, the challenge of providing adequate public education is a complex combination of planning, implementation and politics at the community level. It is in this context that urban publics struggle over education policy amidst competing social ideologies, normative standards for schooling, and the pragmatic dilemmas of rebuilding distressed communities.

In recent years, scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to study the intersection of public education policies with city regimes, state politics and national economic trends. In urban communities the discussion of public schooling also probes issues such as the importance of culturally relevant curricula, creating effective mechanisms for inclusive decision-making, and the politics of educating black and brown youth for participation in society. At its core the debate over public education is a struggle over the vision of democracy and empowerment—the potential for individual empowerment that comes through academic learning and development—and demonstration of collective power that comes through the political action of community members as they create their own vehicles for social change. As the national public

agenda becomes more focused on school reform, different forms of political action are being put into play by diverse stakeholders in the education debate.

This research explores an alternative method for engaging students and community members in the process of democracy, in and out of school; through a case study conducted in the city of New Orleans among educators and community activists working in public schools and their neighborhoods. The focal point is the story of a school-based program called Students at the Center that was created by teachers and students to build academic skills by applying classroom learning to community issues. The larger scope of this study is an examination of the linkages between collaborative initiatives, local networks and broad-based coalitions of youth, activists, educators, artists and business partners. This case offers an example of the ways in which grassroots action can cultivate effective school-community partnerships and spearhead an inclusive movement for community change.

A few fundamental points should be made here about the use of the terms *community* and *democracy* throughout this study as they relate to urban education. Social scientists have long contested the definition of the term *community* and its multiple meanings. Definitions of *community* range from place-based social collectives to extended networks of households and families (Stack, 1974) to common social traits defined by history, identity, or attachment (Suttles, 1972). My use of the term *community* will focus less on the narrow geographic location of local stakeholders in New Orleans, than the participatory role that they choose to play in the collaborations, community networks and cross-sector coalitions that they created. It is important to situate the activities of the participants in their neighborhoods, their city and the larger social fabric

in which they operate, to fully explore the model of community development that is presented here. By purposively linking these domains of action, residents, parents, teachers and young people formed various communities of interest that they defined and enacted through school and neighborhood coalitions. In so doing, they fused theories of democratic education with mechanisms for social transformation

Secondly, the issue of *democracy* and *democratic education* employed in this study is borrowed from Paulo Freire and his progeny of liberatory education theorists. This approach envisions active learning, community connections, and critical reflection as a basis for pedagogy that is aimed at changing the oppressive conditions in society that are reproduced in varied public institutions, particularly schools. In this analysis the role of political action is of the utmost importance. Often, the political mechanisms at work in the public debate over urban schools highlight the divisive nature of any discussion of educational reform. Competing ideals for appropriate means of school-community partnerships and the practical challenges of financing, managing, and monitoring school improvement initiatives are among the many issues that education reformers must address.

This study begins with the assumption that public education can and should be a tool for liberation, particularly in distressed communities. Here, my use of the concept of *democracy* points to a vehicle for liberation that evolves from a process that mobilizes various community actors in a problem-solving effort. In its simplest form, democratic theory as described by Alexis de Tocqueville (p. 67, 1957) stresses the sanctity of the individual such that, “everyone is the best and sole judge of his own private interests.” But democracy as I refer to it, points to the reappropriation of the democratic ideal that

makes the equity of all citizens imperative through their participation in a free and just society. As education theorist Michael Apple (p.155, 1992) asserts:

For too long the concept (democracy) has served a bit too much to legitimate exploitation.... Substantive democracy is a rallying cry to base the control of decisions in the hands of the majority of working people in this country...including the skills and norms of democratic control of one's institutions and the reorganization them so that they benefit the majority of the population.

By drawing parallels between democracy and education for liberation, this study examines the work of coalitions of community actors in the struggle to resist the elitist view of education that socially reproduces a system of inequity in public schools. What follows is the product of a three-year involvement with the Students at the Center program as a participatory action researcher. It is my intention to present this case as alternative paradigm for community building, one that speaks to the importance of making theoretical and practical connections between the personal and academic development of students, and the historicized cultural knowledge produced in urban sites. *Community building*, as I refer to it here, is a holistic approach to addressing community problems through a network of partnerships and resident-driven institutions (Naparstek, Dooley, and Smith, 1997).

There are six core principles of community building that resonate throughout this study. Each of these were demonstrated in the productive activity and problem-solving of groups of educators, activists, and public school students that 1) set goals and strategies to guide their activities, 2) identified community assets and problems, 3) began community action through the work of small groups, 4) developed unique strategies for neighborhood development, 5) reinforced community values while building human and

social capital, and 6) developed creative partnerships with existing institutions and new relationships of their own making. With these principles community members participated in creating an alternative vision of their schools, neighborhoods and prospects for revitalizing their community.

In keeping with the multiple scholar and activist roles this research opened for me, and for the public school teachers and students that I worked with, this story of community development and the political battle for equity in schools and neighborhood life will be presented in multiple voices. In addition, varied domains of representation, cultural expression, and a range of discourses on power that emerged during the process of ethnographic fieldwork are woven through this work in an attempt to answer the original research question that led me to explore the reach of Students at the Center: How can public schools play a role in activist grassroots community development? And more specifically, how can urban students apply their classroom learning to the problems that they face each day in their local surroundings and in their everyday lives?

In this latest study on urban education and civic capacity Clarence Stone (p.168, 2001) writes:

People are not just selfish maximizers following the dictates of incentive. They are—or can be—collectively oriented problem solvers. Although people bring ideas to the table that are colored by self-interest, they can nevertheless learn about the perspectives of others and often can agree on the nature of collective problems. But they do so only in the proper forum.

The assumption that young people have an important role to play in this kind of civic participation and social activism has consequences for policies that regulate education and community development practices. By looking at young people as community members and as students, the goals of collective problem solving through

educational processes can be applied to ensure that learning is responsive to their academic and community needs. In many inner city neighborhoods, schools are first and foremost public institutions in which students define themselves and their relationship to the greater society. For this reason, scholars, activists, and community development professionals can ill-afford to overlook the connections between city schools, city futures, and condition of youth and children in urban America.

CHAPTER 1

Urban Education and the Politics of Community: The Fight for Justice in City Schools

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 324)

It was just after four o'clock on a Friday afternoon and a small group was sitting in a loose circle of chairs, surrounded by framed oil paintings and African sculpture sitting on the floor of the Community Book Center. Seven people gathered in the meeting space at the rear of the shop and took seats in the comfortable low couch or the folding chairs around it that formed a lazy circle. As each person joined the group, heads turned briefly away from the conversation to see which one of the students or familiar community members that frequented the bookstore might wander into the conversation. Jennifer Turner, known far and wide as Mama Jennifer, seemed to know everyone that came in to browse the aisles or check the community bulletin board. She sat casually with the group that afternoon and never looked through the rack of textiles hung with wraps and Dashikis down to the lower level of bookshelves and newspaper racks until someone called for her help.

Mama Jennifer gave her full attention to the conversation, as did the guests that visit regularly and call her bookstore home. That day a group gathered to discuss ways to make education a lifelong process that could benefit their community. Among them was a veteran teacher in the New Orleans public school system, a parent with sons who were

educated in district schools, a few young activists and recent graduates, and two high school students. When I arrived the teacher was helping the group get started by suggesting readings that might give some direction to the young people present.¹

They were members of the Fred Hampton Youth Action Committee, a group named after the 21 year-old Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton. The group agreed to name the organization in honor of Hampton after a student who studied his life talked about his admiration for Hampton's ability to organize many African-American youth in Chicago's Black Liberation Movement.

The young people used the dialogue with community members as a means to think through the issues (e.g. class size, the state achievement exam, and the effects of poverty on learning) they felt were being overlooked by public school reform policies. As a newly formed organization, the young people were grappling with issues that grew out of frustration following a city sponsored Respect the Future Conference. This weekend event was billed as a student-focused initiative designed to facilitate dialogue between youth and city leaders. To ensure youth participation, notices for the conference were circulated in community locations and throughout public schools. Those who made arrangements to attend were fired up and ready to take action. When the city leadership didn't follow up as promised, participants felt like the whole event was just a show and, as usual, their ideas on how to address the challenges of education and civic involvement

¹ David Rusk's study of the New Orleans region, entitled, "Race and Sprawl Shape Greater New Orleans," published in the September 9, 1999, edition of the Times Picayune was one article that was distributed for group discussion. Rusk's study, which was undertaken with the support of the University of New Orleans College of Public and Urban Affairs, was used to discuss issues of race, economic development planning, and concentrated poverty that are described by Rusk as "push factors" at work in the city's urban neighborhoods, along with, "high crime, poor schools and physical deterioration" (Special Supplement, p. 6).

were not taken seriously. After sharing stories about their experiences in different schools around the city, the students were left with more questions than answers.

“If we look at issues like class size alone, the argument with policy makers will get reduced to the monetary concerns, ” warned veteran writing teacher Jim Randels, Director of Students at the Center. The issue of overcrowded classes and under-resourced schools came up repeatedly during the conversation. Eventually, the subject flowed into a discussion of ways to take part in the struggle over the school system leadership, and the new accountability agenda that was bowing to the “standards movement” that has come to dominate the public discourse on education.

Jim continued, “This group needs to answer an important question for itself: What do we want to advocate for?”

“I know the money thing always blocks the conversation. That happens when we complain about not having enough books for every student. Sometimes whole classes don’t have anything but handouts, but it’s not really about that at all,” commented Bruce Coleman, a senior at Frederick Douglass Senior High School, one of the neighborhood schools with the lowest performance rating for the state.

“You can learn without books if you are motivated,” Coleman said, “it’s really about changing attitudes.” Meco Harris, a junior at a nearby citywide access school McDonough 35 agreed. “It’s not about books at all. It’s about the fact that the community will dedicate money to everything else, but not what’s important, and that’s us.”

Schools and Social Constructions

Participating in this conversation was my introduction to collaborative projects that grew out of Students at the Center, a school-based writing program that engages students in community action projects as part of the curriculum. It was also the first time that I ever witnessed a true dialogue among parents, teachers, students, and community leaders that did not devolve into finger pointing and the blame game over the state of urban education. This occasion drew a sharp contrast to the televised School Board meetings and contentious public forums about how to improve the city's schools. The entire community seemed to be perpetually up in arms by the nature of the "reforms" being phased into public schools. One of the most volatile questions at issue was the public outcry over precisely who would participate in the decision-making that held weighty consequences for the city's youth.

At that time in the fall of 1999, the New Orleans Public Schools system was still reeling from the highly publicized departure of its last superintendent and was 10 months into a nationwide search for his replacement. The future of the public school system and its student body seemed to be hanging in the balance while the School Board faced irate parents and frustrated teachers. Community leaders and the business-driven coalition, the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, squared off over the validity of the high stakes test that was poised for implementation. The United Teacher's Union was battling to provide its members with the basics in professional services, such as timely and accurate paychecks. Lawsuits were being filed to prevent the LEAP (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program), the state's version of high stakes testing, from being

used to hold back students in the fourth, eighth, and tenth grades until they passed it. Rumors were circulating that the city may have to take over leadership of public education if a new superintendent was not identified quickly. Mayor Mark Morial demurred at the suggestion, but vowed to “follow the will of the people” and take the reins of the school system if asked.

But there was a vacuum created by the lack of student voices. Young people and their concerns were conspicuously absent from any part in planning what should be done in schools. The firsthand insights of teachers did not have much political currency in the urban schooling rhetoric either. The school “insiders” were not being invited to authentically participate in setting the citywide agenda for education, which seemed to be under the sway of local politics and business leaders.² Though the apocalyptic indictment of public education set forth in *A Nation At Risk*³ was more than a decade old, the reform movement born of 1980s conservatism and its demands for the globalizing economy were playing a strong role in framing the debate on public schools.

Scholars, politicians, and school professionals agree that there is no silver bullet to reform urban education (Stone, 1999). Yet the trend in education policies at federal and state levels is leaning further and further to the political Right, as they tout the advantages of voucher programs that offer school choice, and higher academic performance benchmarks that set the course of education policy nationwide. Still, there is an enduring idea that politics and education are strange bedfellows.

² Stone (1999) uses the regime concept to point out that various stakeholders in education issues occupy different positions that determine their ability to work in cross-sector coalitions and mobilize around community issues like school policy and education reforms.

³ In 1983 the federal Department of Education published a report that centered on the need for higher outcomes from state and local education departments through the development of national standards in the language arts, math, science, and history. Without this, the failure of our public schools would continue to relegate the United States to an ever-diminishing position in the global economy.

In his book, *Changing Urban Education* Clarence Stone (1999) shows that, though the general public is deeply concerned about the state of public education, stakeholders often make assumptions that help education regimes capitalize on public discord. Stone asserts that school systems are reflective of local and state politics that either enhance or limit community empowerment.⁶ He argues that politics are the very means that define ways that various community players work together at the local level, particularly in the struggle over urban schooling. Many people agree that education is one of the cornerstones of our democratic culture and it has become impossible to ignore the role of politics in shaping the fate of urban schools, which lack the resources and public investment of their suburban neighbors. City leaders and neighborhood groups may agree that education policy is an arena for collaborative planning and coalition-building, yet initiatives to reform public schools are often fractured along cultural, economic, and racial lines.

New Orleans is arguably an archetypal example of the deep challenges of city schooling. Though it is a mid-sized city, the public education system is often described with the labels of the big-city problems, including schools filled with black and brown children from lower income families. These students are categorized by neighborhoods rife with crime, drugs, and the disenfranchised. Such frameworks for “urban” life have become common-sense explanations that are posited as an inevitable backdrop for low academic performance (Miron, 1996). New Orleans, an urban center ranked third among the twenty-five cities with the highest percentage of children living in poverty, is cast by

⁶ Stone argues that while the public expects schools to educate children, foster democracy, and build a civic society, most school systems are structured by a network of administrative staff and a superintendent that concentrates power at the top. After conducting an eleven-city study on urban education he found this to be especially true in large, urban school districts.

the media and many of its residents as a city whose school system is doomed for failure. When New Orleanians hear of the school district's standardized test scores, which are some of the lowest in the nation, few are shocked⁴. Worse yet, even fewer appear hopeful that quality teaching and learning can take place in such an environment.

But for students like Meco and Bruce, the urban education "problem" presents no great mystery. Their perspectives do not fixate on one aspect of public school practice as the uniform solution. These students, and others like them, do not look around their schools and suggest that abstract concepts like inferior curriculum and de-skilled teachers are wholly responsible. Instead, their observations come from what they experience each day in the classroom and their daily life, as they recognize that their ideas, opinions, and lived reality are not the focus of most education reform. Their comments reflect an unfulfilled search for signs that the adults around them value their humanity and empowerment. When they determined that was not happening, these young people identified the need, and with the help of sympathetic adults began trying to create that environment for themselves, in their own cultural and community spaces. One way they chose to do this was to recruit more young people to participate in the bi-weekly discussions lead by the Fred Hampton Youth Action Committee. Not long after the group was formed, young people began to pass out flyers at community events that described their need for students to play an active role in their education:

Many news commentators and columnists report daily on the current state of our school system but little efforts are made by our political leaders to improve the learning conditions of our students and encourage student involvement in

⁴ According to 1995 Census figures, New Orleans ranked third out of 25 large cities for the number of children living in poverty, has a citywide literacy rate estimated at 43%, and 27 % of city residents have less than a high school education.

transforming our failing system. Although there have been numerous debates on how to address and tackle these issues, many often ignore the harsh reality of what it really means to be a *student* and *teacher* (emphasis included).

Challenging Definitions and Defining Challenges

Of course the challenges being discussed by the Fred Hampton Youth Action Committee are not unique to New Orleans. The city faces the same problems that hamstring public schools in the grip of increasingly segregated learning environments and heightened social stratification. Louis Miron (1996) challenges the assumptions of the “social problem perspective” that undergirds most writing on urban education and looks to New Orleans as one example. He argues that a myopic focus on simplified measures of student underachievement, high school drop out rates, and teen pregnancy reduces education reform to an analysis of symptoms of school failure. He writes:

In New Orleans, as in other cities, the abysmally low funding for textbooks and student supplies, coupled with an out-of-control bureaucracy that literally locks up student texts in understaffed warehouses, makes a mockery of efforts to closely monitor the implementation of the expected ‘learning outcomes’ of the district’s curriculum and the standards set by state and local school boards.... Only qualitative analysis of the lived culture and experience of students in urban communities currently experiencing restructuring can shed ultimate light on ‘what this all means for schools’ and their students (Miron, 1996, p. 16).

The epistemological approach offered by Miron is a significant departure for much of the research done in the field of education. I will argue that Miron and his colleagues in postmodern education and critical theory make an important contribution to the discourse of pedagogy and comprehensive community building by framing urban education as a vehicle for citizen empowerment. In a city like New Orleans, with an economy based on tourism and service industry laborers, socioeconomic injustice can be

the starting point for educational practices that serve as vehicles for progressive political action. As many scholars of postmodern education, radical pedagogy and culture-centered research have pointed out, there is a growing need for research that helps students to deconstruct the messages about where they fit into the socially constructed hierarchy of race, ethnicity, class, and culture based on Eurocentric values (McLaren, 1998; Miron, 1996; Apple, 1995; Giroux, 1992). These mainstream education policies and many of the research pedagogies that explore them are grounded in an ideology that exalts the status of white males and other social elites. This perspective then is reproduced in the curriculum and pedagogy that create the informal culture of public education.

As patriarchal models of schooling are naturalized, the fact that all educational practices are products of culture and history is obscured. This process has grave consequences for inner city schooling, where social inequities are also infused into the substance of the curriculum and the mechanisms for measuring student learning and success (Miron, 1996, p. 20-1). By privileging Western culture, white male authority is legitimized by the capitalist model of society and schooling. This narrow cultural, political, and social project then becomes the standard for educating young people to be productive members of the society. In this way educational reform movements and curricula get framed as apolitical, and the possibilities for political organizing to strengthen the linkages between education and the equality of opportunity are overshadowed.

Radical critical theorists contributing to the literature of critical pedagogy and postmodern education focus on epistemological approaches to overcome this construction

of urban schools. Scholars from these disciplines believe that school increases the academic skills of students and should be democratically organized to 1) address the need of students, 2) include their cultural perspectives, and 3) undo racism, classism, and sexism prevalent in traditional educational curriculum. In this way students are given the opportunity to historicize their subjective experiences in the exchanging contextual discourse of city life, as they form and re-form their ethnic identities (Smith, 1992). More specifically, it is the focus on a collective and “ideologically organized form of resistance” (Miron, 1996, 141) that can liberate students by linking history, learning, and activism in a broad landscape of social and political relations. In this way young people are enabled to challenge the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1985) and culture of schools that narrowly define excellence in public education.

Sociological theory has illuminated the way that knowledge is socially constructed by forces that ideologically influence all human thought (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Yet students, teachers, and parents rarely find a shared space to problematize the public perception of urban schools by looking closely at the experience of young people in their learning environments. In the New Orleans Public School System all twelve of its neighborhood high schools are performing at, or barely above, levels the state has labeled academically “unacceptable”. In contrast to the district schools, its six citywide access schools, which draw students from all over the city and use entrance exams for admittance, fare far better by state standards, and include the high school with the highest academic record in the state.⁵ As a local journalist reports in a front-page article on the report cards issued for local high schools:

⁵ In October 2001 the *Times Picayune* published a report of the letter grades assigned to all public high schools in New Orleans. According to the states assessment, one citywide access school, Ben Franklin

The extremes in the New Orleans (academic performance) scores point to broader discrepancies inherent within the city's education system, where wealthier parents often place their children in private elementary and middle schools before sending them to the higher-echelon magnet high schools (November 9, 2001, *Times Picayune*).

In essence, citywide access schools are designed to provide learning environments that approximate the city's network of 14 secondary private and parochial schools. Not surprisingly, top performing schools show high correlations between family income and the level of academic achievement. In the seven-parish Greater New Orleans Parish area, the five lowest-performing high schools have poverty rates of 55 percent or higher, while the top five high schools report poverty rates of less than 10 percent (*Times Picayune*, October 17, 2001).

The Politics of City Schools

In the fall of 1999 New Orleans selected a new CEO to lead Louisiana's largest public school system. Al Davis, a former Marine colonel won the position and hired a new Cabinet to help him meet what the media called, "the colossal expectations heaped on Davis to turn around one of the nation's most troubled school systems" (*Times Picayune*, February 4, 2000). Davis and three of his key staff had never worked in the education profession when they took their posts. Yet city business leaders backed Davis and supported the hiring of education outsiders. They justified this stance publicly by arguing that the local educational bureaucracy needed new blood to get back on track and reform the district to better serve its constituency of 11,600 employees and the families of its 80,000 plus student body.

received an A and the designation of the best public high school in the state. McDonogh 35 was graded a B, and Frederick Douglass received an F. The state scores of academic performance are based on results of the preceding years' Graduate Exit Exam, Iowa tests, and attendance and dropout data.

Yet parent activists like Mary Ihsaan, who participated in the “turnaround team” hired to help implement short-term reforms, went on record and criticized the changes proposed by the school system leadership. “It is a serious mistake to have started reform at the management level. It should have started at the school sites,” she told a staff writer for the *Times Picayune*. Though a new CEO of the schools had been hired, the contested political terrain for his work had not been diffused. One of the greatest challenges for urban education policy is the task of meeting the demands of diverse stakeholders in a collaborative effort to bring about change (Stone, 1999). The new CEO had his work cut out for him and community members wondered if he had enough experience to make sweeping changes without broad-based support.

However, the local autonomy of educational institutions remains a highly regarded feature of American political life. Policymakers, activists, and educators from all points on the political spectrum agree that urban education needs a change, but (the question of who should mastermind efforts at the local level leads to battles over control of school districts. As the media reports unparalleled incidents of violence in American schools, the debate over school reform has reached a fever pitch. But public debates over which problems are the most pressing in public education get bogged down quickly. In recent years, discourse on school choice and student achievement has been linked to a range of social issues, including American cultural norms, our national position in the global economy, and the widening influence of the media and technological frontier on our society. At the same time, coalitions of education reformers have begun to form in urban communities around the country. These groups often consist of powerbrokers from

various institutional sectors that have a vested interest in issues associated with city schooling.

This is true in the case of New Orleans, where groups of citizens, community leaders, and parents all express a level of dissatisfaction with the functioning of city schools. Yet it is difficult to identify a shared definition of the salient problems and feasible solutions to rally a broad-based change agenda. Various communities of interest that align themselves are quick to advance agendas that meet their specific concerns and subjective constructions of the issues. Those interested in seeing changes in urban education are awash in the politically elaborated goals that produce new school reform initiatives each year but show a lack of effective parent-school-community relations and collaborative effort (Stone, 1999, p. 237). Is the culprit school organization and curriculum? Is it the social background of students and their families that is undermining our national educational performance? Or is it an invidious combination of inadequate academic standards and communities lagging behind due to changes in the contemporary urban economy?

During the 1980s there was resurgence in the “crisis” perspective on inner city social organization. Much of the urban scholarship at that time focused on poverty, the welfare state, and the number of female-headed households that contributed to a racialized definition of crumbling family structure and community values. During that era, the mass media focused on the failures of minority dominated urban school districts. By linking urban education with urban decay, media images helped to popularize a view of public education in cities that tied black poverty and a host of social problems to a

political agenda that supported budget cutbacks for social welfare programs and increased funding for prisons and the War on Drugs (Aronowitz, 1991).

At the same time, education scholarship also turned to the right with works from Hirsch (1987) and Bloom (1987) which both received a great deal of attention outside of academic circles. These texts attacked the push for multiculturalism and cultural knowledge as harbingers of a generation of cultural illiterates and the era of anti-intellectualism. This argument was premised on a Eurocentric canon of information, texts and knowledge that teachers were to transfer to students. By attempting to take the “politics” out of education and curriculum, policymakers began to craft a recipe of “best practice” that was to be reproduced in one school system after another. Rather than presenting these ideas as historically privileged language and culture, they are constructed as part of a common culture that belongs to everyone (Shor, 1992, p. 32).

This arena for debate marked a shift in the rhetoric on education policy. In the past, corporate ideals were linked to calls for education reform to help strengthen the economic base of our society by providing an educated workforce. But as education policy began to address the cultural aspects of public education, what was once an indirect suggestion became an explicit warning: Western traditions of capitalism, and the white male canon of history and literature, should be preserved through the creation of new national educational standards. Without this, the decay of urban neighborhoods and loss of community would inevitably cause our cities to self-destruct, and cripple our national economy. Suddenly multicultural pedagogy and curriculum were under increased political pressure to abandon the preservation of cultural differences in pursuit of the standardization movement. What has resulted is a deficit model trend in

educational policy, which represents students and their urban neighborhoods as deficient, devoid of valid culture or language, and in need of proper socializing.

As Michael Apple points out, “no longer is the term equality linked to past group oppression and disenfranchisement. It is now simply a case of guaranteeing an individual choice under the conditions of a free market” (Apple, 1993, in Miron, 1996, p. 48). As a consequence, disorganized neighborhoods fraught with social, academic, and economic failings are equated with urban reality. In turn, these have become a metaphor for the identities of inner city students. The tendency to ignore the socially constructed meanings of terms like *urban* and its connotations for envisioning student potential, has significant impact in the debates over urban education. By attempting to take the politics out of education to craft a recipe of “best practices” that can be reproduced in every school system, successful school reform will continue to be elusive in city schools.

In many cities, urban education and its connection to local prospects for development and economic health have contributed to the growing influence of business leaders in the shaping of an education agenda. But these efforts are often the source of public discord over the lack of community participation in school reform policies that impact urban neighborhoods. Much of the urban theory produced by sociologists and urban planners struggles to address the “tangle of pathology” that has come to symbolize black identities and urban communities. When attempting to explain the disempowerment of urban communities today, some theorists argue that the legacy of segregation has worsened following the Civil Rights movement, leading to conditions of increased racial isolation of inner cities (Massey & Denton, 1996). Other theorists have focused on the structural changes in the economy as an explanation for the rise of

entrenched poverty (Jargowsky, 1997; Wilson, 1987). In the current discourse, the conservative political machine offers a depoliticized view of urban space and the policies that support economic development, education reform, and neighborhood planning. As this paradigm has become naturalized in public outcry for school improvement, there is a lack of meaningful socio-historical study of public education as part of a power-based analysis of city life and its institutions (Anyon, 1997).

For example, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson, 1987) made a significant mark when it advanced a model that explained the isolation of poor blacks due to the loss of the “social buffer” provided by the black middle class from ghetto areas.⁷ Wilson (1987, p. 57) goes on to describe the effect of this social phenomenon on inner city schools as he asserts,

The net effect is that joblessness, as a way of life, takes on a different social meaning; the relationship between schooling and post school employment take on a different meaning. The development of cognitive, linguistic and other educational and job-related skills necessary for the world of work in the mainstream economy is thereby adversely affected. In such neighborhoods, therefore, teachers do not teach and children do not learn. A vicious cycle is perpetuated through the family, through the community, and through the schools.

Today’s youth undeniably face our society’s most intractable problems. As the current discussions of strategies to reform public schools center on issues such as the proposed voucher system and the push to increase academic standards, poor kids, many of them of color, have opted out of school success (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Some

⁷ William Julius Wilson argues that growing popularity of the conservative perspectives on “ghetto underclass” in urban communities have rightfully supplanted perspectives of liberals who emphasize “how the plight of disadvantaged groups can be related to the problems of the broader society, including problems of discrimination and social-class subordination” (p. 5). Instead, Wilson attributes the indicators of urban poverty and the social dislocation of ghetto underclass to “profound changes in class structure and the social behavior of ghetto neighborhoods” (1987, p. 8).

are caught up in cycles of materialism and short-term gratification; others face extreme poverty and the rejection of school authorities that import middle-class values and legitimize the lived experience of selective group (Apple, 1992; Miron & St. John, 1994). Teenagers who lack a sense of purpose and belonging too often become a negative force in cities--either directly through physical acts of violence or indirectly through loss of hope and unfulfilled potential.

Student perspectives on the reality of their experiences is left largely unexamined by education researchers and urban scholars like Wilson who study those labeled “at risk,” “disadvantaged,” and “LSES” (lower social economic status). Public education is under increasing demands for reform but it is rarely seen as a site for positive social formation in cities. More often, inner city schooling is framed as a place for public school educators to build the technical competencies to mitigate the effects of crime, violence, and poverty in the neighborhoods where their students reside. Standardized curricula do not problematize these realities socially, culturally, or politically. In addition, the current school-reform movement supported by business elites and federal policymakers explicitly discourages a critical analysis of these issues as a part of a pedagogy of democratic education. Instead, policy makers tacitly ignore socioeconomic inequities that underpin the sites of urban schools and neighborhoods, as educators are expected silently struggle to overcome the problems of individual students and their families.

Building Community Coalitions

I began this introduction with an ethnographic account that represents a much larger process of engaged research and dialogic inquiry with a network of students,

teachers, community partners and parents working for social justice in New Orleans schools and neighborhoods. In the sections to follow, I will address the political, social, and cultural imperatives of this vision of collective action. Such a task is necessarily rooted in the “politics of place” and the intention of “education as the practice of freedom” (Haymes, 1995; Shor, 1992; Fraser, 1991; Freire, 1970). Through my research, which spans three years working with community residents in New Orleans, I learned that any study of urban education issues should not focus strictly on the practice of teachers and the achievement of students. Education must be understood as a public good and societal value that is constructed both in and out of classrooms. The public agenda and the framing of its various social dimensions construct urban schools with images of poor academic achievement and urban social disorganization.⁸

This study includes an in-depth examination of work being done by a collective of students, teachers, and community partners, who are creating alternative media as a part of the public school curriculum. Through the use of multimedia projects, issues of social equity, local history, and cultural expression are used in classrooms as tools of social critique, political analysis, and community action. As the program is further detailed, particular attention will be given to the ways that students are prepared to create their own media to share the stories that they wish to tell about themselves and their communities.

⁸ Sociologists have begun to look at the behavior, achievement, and challenges facing youth as a process that is increasingly affected by the impact of media influences on Americans. In *Framing Youth: Myths About the Next Generation* (1998) Mike Males applies the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1980) to examine the ways in which the mainstream press frames the debate and imposes invisible censorship that distort and confine social issues related to young people. As an example, Males argues that school killings have become opportunities to use scare tactics that advance a wide array of political agendas, ranging from gun control to juvenile curfews.

In following chapters, I will describe Students at the Center (SAC), a school-based program of credit-bearing elective courses that enable students and teachers to design, research, and conduct academic and community improvement projects. Its purpose is to deepen student involvement with the community at large through their learning experience in urban schools. Such an emphasis is grounded in three key points that clarify my approach to urban education and its socially constructed meanings.

First, I begin from the premise that public education is much more than a service provided by local and state government. It is a process for the development of human potential and consciousness. As such, it must also be an inclusive practice for social change. The theories of liberatory education, radical pedagogy, and cultural-centered knowledge that underpin this ontological assumption are not new ideas among the proponents of active learning and discourses on engaged pedagogy. It is my intention to elaborate on this body of work and add to the interdisciplinary scholarship by focusing on the ways that student empowerment challenges the hegemonic framework of capitalism that is reproduced in urban schools. Scholarship that begins from this perspective seeks to reconstruct the purpose of education in accordance with community needs. For this reason student identities, community issues, and the specific time and place that urban schooling occurs become the focal points of my research. I will emphasize instances of teaching and learning where students think critically and act as agents of change on issues that impact upon their lives. This program relies on students, teachers, and various community partners to create a pedagogy that is built on collaborative projects.

Secondly, I argue that this process, which I term Embedded Social Action, must be participatory at all levels. This requires that teachers and students co-develop curricula

that speaks to community needs. To work in this way school activities and student learning must be extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Successfully enacting this kind of holistic participatory model requires that students use the knowledge and skills that they bring with them to school and that they acquire through intensive study, to act as researchers and resources to their community. Embedded knowledge and social action can then be wed, as urban students take part in learning processes that open city schools to community members who wish to work collaboratively with teachers and students.

Lastly, this vision of education and action dictates a new a method for reforming schools that reframes the concept of accountability in education. I will therefore describe the ways that pedagogy can act simultaneously on the political and the academic domain to validate culturally-centered knowledge. The intersection of these spheres is key to articulating effective teaching and learning practices that do not silence students and unilaterally negate the historical and social realities of their neighborhoods.

Joyce King (1995) describes various forms of culture-centered knowledge at work within the current educational discourse that symbolize divergent constructions of “difference”¹. She presents a four-category typology that describes forms of culture-centered knowledge by the degree of curriculum transformation and empowerment that teaching and learning process enact. Each category represents varied communities of interest and political perspectives, such as Marginalizing Knowledge, Invisibilizing

¹ Giroux (1992), McLaren (1989), and Shor (1986) are critical educators who interpret the attacks on multicultural education in the same way as many scholars of Black Studies, such as Asante (1992), Gordon (1992), and Semmes (1992). Both disciplines observe that since the 1980s the language of pluralism has been co-opted to support the resurgence of nativism in the national political climate. These critiques share an interpretation of the social constructions of the dominant culture, which they argue are based on racial inequality, and frame public education policy as an extension of this ideology.

Knowledge, Expanding Knowledge, and Deciphering Knowledge. The pedagogy of Embedded Social Action that I observed pointed to a need for interrelated forms of Expanding and Deciphering Knowledge, which King (1995, p. 274). describes as:

Expanding Knowledge and Deciphering Knowledge involve the curriculum transformation that can be identified with autonomy...and democracy, or 'pluralism with hierarchy' (Asante, 1992, p. 22) and cultural affirmation is the ideological interest in the social framework this type of curriculum seeks to bring about.

One premise of this research is that through a process of Embedded Social Action students can expand and decipher their knowledge through collaborative pedagogies that “enable people to recognize and value their cultural knowledge and promote revitalization and self-help” (Kleymeyer & Moreno, 1988, p. 36). This process recognizes that, while people’s daily cultural practice and social experience is silenced by the dominant ideology, these practices can also cultivate liberating action that begins with the cultural knowledge of the community (King, 1995; King & Mitchell, 1990; Rodney, 1975). In this way the social effects of knowledge are inseparable from action for community change.

Using this reconstructed vision of urban education implies that new forms of knowledge produced in city schools cannot be interpreted strictly through an analysis of quantitative assessments such as test scores and socio-demographic aggregates. The epistemology of urban educational research that guides this study focuses on three interlocking spheres: 1) the production of knowledge that is linked to the history, goals, and needs of real communities; 2) the examination of the social interests of diverse groups and possibilities for engaging students in aspects of community governance; and

3) the promotion of collective goals rather individualism in educational practice and achievement.

Learning in Action

My research methodology for engagement with Students at the Center parallels the pedagogy and classroom methods of the program. Therefore, great emphasis is given to the range of ways that community and school partnerships develop the capacity to transform knowledge in accordance with their own needs (Aronowitz, 1994). Inherent in this approach is a challenge to the epistemological foundations of traditional studies in the discourse of urban education, particularly with regard to empirically based claims of validity and reliability. As a researcher, my interest is in placing the voices of students and at the center of data collection and interpretation of the case study findings. In keeping with the “community development view of urban schooling” (Miron, 1996, p. 24) the research methods employed in this study treat people’s words about their experiences as valid data, and the source of theoretical insight that should guide inquiry.

This account stresses purposeful acts of empowerment, collaboration and meaning- making by the people with whom I worked through my roles as researcher, community member, and as a participatory citizen.¹⁰ In all of these roles I listened intently to the needs of the community members who were working for social justice in their city and their school system. Along the way I hope that my work has already

¹⁰ This use of the term *empowerment* elaborates on the “ladder of citizen participation” defined by Sherry Arnstein (1969) as an eight-rung typology for classifying the degree of citizen control in policymaking. She argues that true empowerment comes through a real transfer of power which “guarantees that participants or residents can govern a program or institution, be in full charge of policy and managerial aspects, and be able to negotiate the conditions under which ‘outsiders’ may change them” (p. 223). This study builds on that concept, and focuses more specifically on empowering participation, which Eldin and Levin (1991) describe the degree to which varied stakeholder viewpoints and interests are used to create a dialogue to determine the a method of inquiry and participatory action research.

contributed , and will continue to contribute, to a social movement that was already in motion.

Chapter 2 traces the development of this program by a teacher and a small group of students from one class into an expansive network of collaborations and community-based projects. Early in the process of conducting my fieldwork I realized that Students at the Center was growing in some arenas of local activism and being resisted in others because of its explicit political mission. For this reason I aim to describe this program in its urban context rather than present a detailed chronological recapitulation of events.

Chapter 3 details the methods of participatory action research embodied in the SAC model of reflection and action. I also describe my role as a researcher in collaboration with community groups, educators, and students. The process and purpose of this methodology is outlined as the foundation for projects that I observed and took part in as an action researcher. More specifically, this section elaborates on the theory behind the program's activist agenda and community partnerships.

Chapter 4 focuses on the forms of expression and production of new knowledge evidenced by the academic and community work of the Students at the Center program. I stress the intersections of education and community-building discourses and the ways that students and community members struggle over the cultural meaning and politics of place that these junctures embody.

Chapter 5 provides an alternative framework for education reform by using a pedagogy of Embedded Social Action. Such a shift holds the possibility for constructing policies that foster collaboration among educators, activists, and local policymakers. By using examples from this case, I demonstrate techniques for connecting education with

democratic action that redefines public space in urban communities. Special attention is given to use of multimedia work that contributes to a public discourse on community issues. Chapter 6 concludes by looking at the practical and theoretical implications of this kind of community building for schools and neighborhood development efforts.

Just as all educational practices are a product of culture and history, so too is this study of local activism and democratic pedagogy. My own theoretical and political affinities cannot be separated from this work, nor can the collective processes of its participants. My arguments come directly from what I have learned by working among teachers, students, and community members, in their classrooms and neighborhoods. This research aims to illuminate the conditions and construction of a pedagogy that ties academic learning to social action in urban schools and communities.

CHAPTER 2

Creating a Community of Learners: Developing Collaborations that Build on Neighborhood Assets

Problem-posing education affirms men and women as being in process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality (Freire, 1970, p. 72).

When I began to observe SAC and its operation as a means of community building and collaboration I was particularly insightful about the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR). At that time, I had been living in New Orleans for almost two years and was seeking out community building activities as expression of my academic and personal interest. When I met Jim in the fall of 1999, it was because a professor suggested that I talk with him about my views on community development and his work in the public school system. I took her advice, and went to that meeting with few expectations. The limited information I had about the New Orleans Public School System was colored by newspaper articles and television reports on the evening news. Like most New Orleanians, each spring I watched the network coverage of droves of hopeful parents and guardians camping overnight, and sometimes for days on end, to enter the lottery for a place in the public schools of their choice.

The competition for one of the prized spots in these schools is part of the city's public culture. Adults concerned with getting their children into one the few “decent” learning environments available in the city's public education system jockey for space and call in favors to get access to options outside of district schools in their

neighborhoods. Many people believe that these efforts are necessary and important if their children are to have a successful school experience, one that give students the opportunity to attend competitive colleges outside of Louisiana. Citywide access schools, or magnets, provide an accessible alternative for parents unable to afford the high tuition at select private and parochial schools in New Orleans. At elementary magnet schools, the use of entrance exams and identifiable talents in subjects like the arts, math, or science, are not enough to guarantee enrollment for eligible students. There are simply too many young people for a limited number of spaces, and media communicates a clear message every year: In this community there is a shortage of this valuable commodity.

The scramble for educational opportunity provides little discussion on the fate of the majority of students left behind while a few reap the benefits of specialized learning environments. Such fragmented constructions of schools are inextricably linked to media characterizations of urban reality, many of which are supported by political grandstanding on the issues of urban education and youth deviance. This rhetoric takes place in all spheres of political discourse, from local debates on district leadership to the perils of a changing world discussed by heads of state.

When President Clinton spoke before a group of New Orleans teachers in 1998 during his round of school-safety speeches following the rash of school killings around the nation, he urged his audience to face school violence as an objective reality and troubling trend.¹ The President warned against “the kids who infest schools” with aggressive behavior and “constant back talk” (Males, 1999, p. 59). He never touched on

¹ The Associated Press ran a story on December 7, 1997, about his response to violence in schools and his public appearances to address the issue in selected communities. In *Framing Youth: Ten Myths About the Next Generation*, Mike Males (1999) references this account in his discussion of mass media and its role in constructing biased perceptions of young people.

the conditions that breed violence in communities where students live, or the multiple contexts of young peoples' lives, in and outside of school. Instead, President Clinton did what many politicians do when they talk about public schools and the students that attend them: he presented a framework of public education that conflates issues of social disintegration, and the behavior of troubled individuals, with youth deviance and wholesale academic failure. These merged images then begin to animate public opinion on the challenges facing educators and the institutions that govern urban education. Though the trend of school killings that received the greatest media attention took place in suburban schools with relatively few of students of color, the coverage of these events by the mass media contributed to the false, though popular, image of wholesale violence, drugs, and chaos in public schools (Males, 1999, p. 349).

I had never worked with or in public schools before, but when Dr. Martha Ward mentioned Jim Randels to me his name was vaguely familiar. Upon arriving at my neighborhood coffeehouse for our first meeting, I recognized his face immediately. The previous year the *Gambit*, a widely distributed weekly paper that covers the arts, entertainment, and community interest stories, did a cover story on his selection as the New Orleans Teacher of Year. When I met him that Saturday in November he began telling me what it is like teaching in two public high schools at the same time. One is a citywide access school, McDonogh 35, and the other is one of the lowest performing schools in the district, Frederick Douglass Senior High. He explained that parents and students work hard to get into McDonogh 35 because of its reputation for excellence, while the students at Frederick Douglass are often there because they don't have records

of academic achievement or adults in their lives with the economic means or political savvy to push their way into select schools.²

The Urban Landscape

A comparative look at these two schools speaks volumes about public education in New Orleans. These school sites are within three miles of one another, and both have populations of over 1000, where at least 98% of the student body is African America. In both schools, over 50% of the students receive free lunch and live in neighborhoods that have a disproportionately high concentration of many statistical indicators of social and economic hardship.³ Frederick Douglass is located in the Bywater neighborhood, a historic area bound on one side by the Industrial Canal and another by the Mississippi River. Originally settled by French immigrants and Creoles, Bywater has a long tradition of community pride and civic involvement through active neighborhood organizations like the Vieux Carre Commission, the Bywater Neighborhood Association, and the Crescent City Peace Alliance, whose office sits less than a mile from the public high school. Douglass High has weathered significant socioeconomic changes through the years along with the neighborhood, which is included on the National Register of Historic Places.

² Douglass High School also has the largest number of secondary students enrolled in Special Education courses in the New Orleans Public School System. Many teachers and school staff contend that this is a result of unspoken practices that remove students with behavioral and discipline problems from traditional classrooms in other schools and transfer these students to a single location as a matter of politics and policy.

³ A 1998 New Orleans application for Empowerment Zone designation identified both areas among 12 distinctive neighborhoods with a 30% higher incidence of children living in poverty, 30% more unemployment among women, and income averages that were 40% of other households in the city. According to 1995 Census data, average household incomes in the neighborhoods where McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass are located were \$6,743 as compared to \$14,833 for New Orleans overall.

McDonogh 35 is located in Treme, the New Orleans neighborhood often referred to as the birthplace of jazz. The school sits three city blocks from the home of historic Congo Square, the site where slaves gathered on Sundays and were able to maintain their religious and social traditions. Treme is noted for its contributions to African and African American history and the cultural retention of African music, dance, and worship. Through the years, academic and cultural studies have proliferated over the community lore on the area's role in the development of New Orleans voodoo, and its position as an exemplar of urban slave culture in the United States. Locally, few refute the commonly held belief that it is the "first black community in America" because of its original settlement by free people of color. The first residents of Treme were the skilled craftsmen and artisans who are credited with the architecture and building arts that define the built environment of New Orleans. Today, Congo Square and its history as home to many early jazz musicians and expressions of African culture is marked by the Louis Armstrong Park, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, and the community radio station WWOZ.

The richness of neighborhood life and local history serve as the basis for much of Jim's work as teacher in both schools. In his 1998 *Gambit* article he recalls an incident earlier that year when his students from Frederick Douglass and McDonogh 35 attended a talk at the Black Arts National Diaspora, Inc. (B.A.N. D.) building in Treme. The talk, given by Dr. Cheryl Rodriguez of the University of South Florida, detailed her work with Central Avenue Legacies Project in Tampa. Rodriguez shared her research with my Urban Anthropology class at the University of New Orleans the day before, where she described her work with community members on an oral history project.

The Central Avenue Legacies Project tells a familiar tale for observers of urban development and neighborhood change in the United States. The oral history project was created to celebrate the glory and community memory of a thriving African American neighborhood that was destroyed by the construction of Florida's interstate highway. Jim recalls the importance of taking students to hear Dr. Rodriguez speak in the same building that once housed the Standard American Life Insurance Company, a business that was an anchor in the neighborhood's commercial district before the expressway was built. Afterward, the North Claiborne Bridge carved a path through Treme that razed buildings and changed the character of neighborhood and its community life.

Some of the students at McDonogh 35 were already looking at the effects of these events in the city's history and were working with North Claiborne/St. Bernard Avenue Economic Development Association to produce a newsletter that covered topics like economic development and community planning to help revive the area. But other students had never heard about this side of urban history that affected their lives and changed black communities around the country. Jim recalls:

In a discussion with representatives from UNO's Anthropology Department, the word 'culture' frequently had come up as speakers stressed the importance of students understanding their own community. A month before, it was first week of school and my first day at Frederick Douglass, and students were peering out the high windows of our beautiful St. Claude Avenue building. I asked my students as they looked at the downtown skyline to describe their Bywater neighborhood in relationship to the distant office buildings. Jason, a lanky senior looked out the window and replied, 'I've never been there'.⁴

This recollection was included in a longer article that he wrote to talk about his honor as Teacher of the Year in the context of his own experience as a white male teacher

⁴ This passage from the November 17, 1998, *Gambit Weekly* is an excerpt from a feature article.

who was the product of a New Orleans Public School education. He believes that his experience in public schools helped him to develop a philosophy of teaching that begins by using the historical and cultural environment to engage students in community action projects. He claims that this kind of activity can combat media reports that reinforce negative views of urban education and of the young people that are often depicted only as high school dropouts, teenage mothers, and criminals. A big part of his work has become changing these socially constructed perceptions, for the students that are exploited by them, and for the community at large.

When spending time talking with teachers and staff members at both schools I found that students at the McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass shared many of the same characteristics, a fact that is masked by the emphasis on the differences in their educational environments. Teachers and administrators at the schools know this, and those that have been in school system for two decades or more y have witnessed the ways that social factors have changed their schools. At one time Frederick Douglass Senior High was full of white children and was named Nicholls, after the 19th century Democratic governor noted for his role in state politics that halted black political power during the Reconstruction era.

Conversely, McDonogh 35 has long been revered for its historical achievement in the early 20th century as the first public school where people of African descent could receive a high school education. This school, traditionally thought of an institution of the elite, carries with it the proud heritage of black Creole culture and social privilege (Hirsch & Logsdon, 1992). Today, many of the students whose parents are able to get

them into McDonogh 35 come from the area it borders, the Bywater neighborhood around Douglass High School.⁶

The Local Terrain

The vision for SAC came from an observed need for praxis-oriented research and learning driven by student experiences.⁷ There are important lessons to be learned from the trajectory of Students at the Center, which began as a concept for engaged learning in a single classroom and has evolved to its current operation in 10 public secondary schools in New Orleans. The foundation of the program is a series of writing classes with no more than 15 students. To create this environment in a city school, innovative tactics were employed to provide the kind of small class setting that is about half the size of a traditional class. For Jim, small classes are necessary to teach the kind of workshop approach to writing that he uses to build cooperation among community groups, families, and other schools. In this way, education is conceived as an ongoing process developed to benefit a localized community, not to create structures for individual achievement and personal mobility (Apple, 1992).

The idea was developed when his students began to talk about what was missing in their education, and he challenged them to envision ways to make their learning a more effective and meaningful experience. According to Erica DeQuir, graduate of

⁶ According to the school profile of McDonogh 35 approximately 15% of the student body come from the Douglass neighborhood. This is the third largest portion of the student body attending McDonogh 35 of any other district school in the city.

⁷ Paulo Freire (1970) and his progeny in the field of revolutionary education are influenced by Marxist thought as they define praxis as the combination of purposeful reflection and action. They assert that is definition of praxis can only arise from the dialogue of teachers and students, as they address the oppressive conditions that face them as learners and social beings.

McDonogh 35 and one of Jim's former students, that dilemma prompted her class to connect their academic knowledge with larger education issues. Erica says that when she "began to look at my society and myself critically," a world of possibility was opened:

When I was senior in high school, I was in the Jim Randels Advanced Placement English class. I had him for a block in English, with a double in Black Studies. I was in his course and we did a lot of work. Mr. Randels, with this style of teaching is always giving a lot of feedback on writing. Because it was advanced placement, it wasn't the usual, 'read this and do a journal about it' kind of learning. It was kind of long three or four page essays, and really revising and building it. And it was the first time I was really introduced to that. I always got, 'Okay your essay is due here,' but I never did have feedback on it, or learn the importance of revising it over and over, and seeing how your work continuously improves.

Erica has clear memories of being a student in a class of 30 and feeling frustrated that everybody in the class did not get time to really discuss their work with the teacher and other students. She recalls that her peers, who were struggling to write college essays and preparing for collegiate entrance exams, would ask for her input on their writing because she was, "in that smart class." Over time Erica realized that other students also needed someone to talk to them about their work and help them to progress as writers and critical thinkers. When she mentioned this to her teacher, Jim told her that he agreed but for educators that work with 180 students each day it is impossible to give students the individualized attention they deserve.

Rather than letting his students be satisfied to discuss the shortcomings in their educational experience, classroom dialogue served as a means to think collectively and begin identifying problems and posing a solution. That process gave birth to Students at the Center, when a small group of students of the McDonogh 35 class of 1996 decided to take action. According to Erica:

Jim Randels, and myself and another young woman named Kenyatta Johnson came together and talked about how good our class could be if it were smaller. We knew we could really help a lot of people.

Based on that dialogue, he suggested that the three of them write a grant for the funding to provide a small class setting for students to develop their writing skills and eventually serve as mentors in writing to the rest of school. He explains the way that the SAC program evolved and the political and pedagogical implications of the strategy that was created in response to a specific need he saw in his classes:

If you are talking about education, at least on one level you are asking, ‘What are the needs of teachers and what are the needs of students? What are our academic needs? How can we further the goals and objectives of our classroom and meet the learning styles of our students?’ I think it’s an important analysis, but I don’t think you can do that in a normal classroom really well. And so, we started SAC and we began looking at how to use students as a resource within the school. For me, that’s a way of defining grassroots community building. From my perspective as a teacher the only way to do that was to create the small class size and the elective curriculum, so we could move in and out of different topics and issues that would be related to either a community group or another classroom.

The Theoretical Grounding

The type of learning experience that Jim sought to share with his students is precisely what progressive educators like Freire (1970) refer to as the method of “conscientization.” It also illustrates the process of “decolonization” that hooks (1994) asserts is necessary to prepare students of color to construct their identities in resistance to the racism and white supremacy of capitalism. This method of teaching requires reflection on the environment in which students are educated, and action to transform the

environment in the service of social equity. The possibilities for what Freire and hooks describe as “praxis” and what other scholars have called “human agency” (Lauria, Miron & Dashner, 1994) are presented in the educational discourse on democratic schooling. This perspective places great emphasis on using pedagogic philosophies and discursive practices that enable people to act in the social milieu with the cultural products that they create and possess (Giroux, 1992).

Such a conceptual grounding of education frames it as a public sphere in which students develop identity politics that are greater than one’s perception of self, but are instead a dynamic multi-layered, relational, and socially constructed vehicle for social justice. In the language of resistance theory, the “identity work” that such inherently political activity requires is an expression of “student culture” (Miron & Lauria, 1995) that groups of young people create and play out in the “micropolitics of schools” through the apparatus of power relations (Aronowitz, 1991; Ball 1987; Everhart 1983; Fine, 1989, 1992; Foucault, 1972). As scholars of critical theory point out, there are ideological interests at work in the content of the school curriculum that construct particular racist, sexist, and class-centered representations of students and their opportunity for economic and social mobility. These messages are coded in the historical and cultural practices through which knowledge is produced, mediated, and consumed as part of traditional pedagogical processes.⁸ For this reason, the literature of critical theory gives a great deal of attention to understanding the way particular forms of student resistance are crafted in the social and cultural terrain of schools.

⁸ For detailed description of the role of curriculum and pedagogy as a tool of oppression, see Phillip Wexler, “Structure, Text, and Subject: A critical Sociology of School Knowledge” in Michael Apple, ed., *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education* (1982).

Central to this perspective is the insistence that schools are both instructional sites and cultural domains, where learning and knowledge should include varied social and cultural forms, such as the everyday experience, languages, histories, and values that shape students' investment in classroom work (Gilligan, 1993; Giroux, 1983, 1992; Wexler, 1988; Willis, 1977). To integrate lived experience with classroom learning, a dialectic approach is needed to develop useful school knowledge by addressing the social relations that either empower or silence students.

By attempting to create what Aronowitz and Giroux call, "a politics and pedagogy of voice" that allows students to construct their own experience in a broad context of critical citizenship and democracy, educators can redefine the tasks of public education (1991, p. 89). Hence, the curriculum can become a medium of social discourse, led by student voices and situated in a critical reading of texts and codes that shape the subjects under study. The ideologies of historical and institutional practices in schools must also be unpacked to discover possibilities for a democratic learning in the spheres of public education (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991).

In practical terms this suggests that while the state is placing education under increasingly stringent curriculum standards and regulatory authority, the power that operates in schools is, in the postmodern vernacular, "decentered" by human subjects. Thus teachers, community members, and students have the capacity to act politically in the struggle for empowerment and democracy, "to make public schooling in the city more responsive to, and more reflective of, community needs and values" (Miron, 1996, p. 115). Teachers interested in taking a more critical and political role in addressing the conditions under which they work, can begin to define themselves in this process as

public intellectuals who are willing to strive for larger goals of liberation and social justice (McLaren, 1989). As they begin to construct education as a democratic expression of knowledge that students can use to empower themselves, the learning process and its curricula must be meaningful to students.

Such a radical pedagogy (Giroux 1993) requires representations and social practices that deconstruct and redefine social relations and sources of knowledge.⁹ A scholar of communication, J. Brenkman (1979), applies the language of Marxism to a proposal for a hermeneutics of culture that can be effectively appropriated by educators, and is worth quoting fully here:

Interpretations which read cultural text in relation to other historical situations and effects must conserve or subvert meanings according to their validity not for an already constituted tradition but for a community in process.... Such a hermeneutics becomes valid only as it serves to construct oppositional cultural experiences, an oppositional public sphere. It is a political task. The dominant tendency of our cultural institutions and practices—from the organization of the learning process in the school and the academic modes of knowledge which support them to the mass mediate forms of communication which pre-empt the speaking itself—is to undermine the very possibility for human beings to interpret the discourse that found their identities, shape their interactions and regulate their activities. Only a process of interpretation which counters this tendency, actively and practically, can preserve the possibilities of a historical consciousness founded on collective experience (p. 109; in Giroux, 1997, p. 91).

Joyce Chapital, one of the first SAC teachers at McDonogh 35, recognizes the hidden connections between the growing number of select schools in the city and the fate of the neighborhood schools and communities from which they draw. Joyce is a former resident of the lower 9th ward, one of the earliest black communities for war veterans moving into the suburbs of New Orleans during the national explosion of

⁹ Hermeneutics, and its emphasis on the interpretation of meanings, is an important theoretical construct to understand the development of knowledge and its context-dependent definitions (Sayer, 1996).

homeownership following WWII. This historic neighborhood runs along the river a few miles past Douglass High School across the Industrial Canal. Its geography and legacy are part of local history as the site of immense devastation following Hurricane Betsy of 1965. The storm changed the neighborhood forever as it killed hundreds and swallowed homes in waters that reached rooftops. Today the area known as the “lower nine” bears the brand of black communities everywhere that have suffered from neighborhood displacement, disinvestments, economic isolation and poverty, and eventual ravages of drugs (Halpern, 1995).

Residents that lived through Hurricane Betsey were interviewed by Joyce’s students as part of a collaborative oral history project involving Students at the Center and storytellers from the Positive Outreach Leaders, a group of young residents in the lower 9th ward, who were also students attending the public school in the neighborhood. Young people from Lawless Senior High worked with Joyce’s class and theater educators to develop a performance based on stories collected from interviews. Eventually community narratives were woven together with historical research compiled on historical liberators like Charles Deslondes, leader of the 1811 Slave Revolt.

This insurrection, not taught in history courses in public schools, is an example of an important social justice struggle which mobilized 500 slaves throughout rural Louisiana to march on New Orleans for their freedom. Students began to see the linkage between these events when they saw community members still pained by the rumor that a decision was made regarding which area of the protective levee should be opened to prevent the entire the city from flooding. Many living residents still associate the

destruction of their lower nine neighborhood with a social injustice that was far more destructive than the natural disaster itself.

Joyce claims that her teaching practice improved from the experience of working on a project that connected culture with historical events, and gave students the opportunity to and take their learning beyond the walls of the school. Prior to that project she focused on teaching writing by tacking it onto traditional studies of literature and English texts, but she was impressed by the transformation that she witnessed as her students took an active role in researching writing and collaborating on the production of *Lower Nine Stories*. She says:

I worked with SAC until about a year ago when I became assistant principal. I'd been working with SAC since its inception at McDonogh 35 and have worked with Jim Randels for years before that doing team teaching. In my classes we covered the *Lower Nine Stories*. We actually went into the lower 9th ward with my students and we sat in places like barber shops, listening to conversations and interviewing people. It was very enlightening. I lived in the lower nine when my husband was alive, but I never saw the richness until we went back to do the interviews. We also visited senior citizen homes and interviewed people there. The kids had to transcribe the interviews and then organize it into a form that people could read and digest. We were learning how to do oral history. We gave some of the material to Jim's sister Kathy, who turned it into a reader's theater. It made for a rich class.

Charting the Course: Teachers as Community Organizers

Jim claims that his motivation to fulfill his mission a teacher and community member gave birth to the program. The use of history and culture was a natural extension of the writing course that was designed to create situations where students can engage in public discussion about the issues that affect their lives. Students at the Center is based

on the use of a historically grounded organic praxis that gets students to think critically about their society (Freire, 1970). Positioning students as the engines of education follows the legacy of Paulo Freire and others who argue that professional educators must act as organizers in a community of learners who analyze and theorize about their lives and the social myths that frame their school curricula. Jim notes:

The whole neighborhood school issue is really important to us. I know it's happening across the nation, but here it's huge. Before integration in the late 60's and early 70's, we already had this infrastructure of parochial schools. Then we started building whole separate high schools to exclude people on the basis of academic achievement, race, and class. That trickled down to middle and elementary schools in the 80's and 90's and increased in the high schools during that time.

He goes on to connect the history of public schools to contemporary reform:

Now we have a university wanting to set up a charter district, a legislature that keeps proposing and almost passing laws to have university presidents and the mayor appoint the school board, and charter and voucher plans creeping in on the heels of mandated school takeover plans. Schools are segregated now not only by race and class but also, devastatingly, by whether or not your parents and you, the student, have taken time and energy to enter the lottery to get into a charter school, taken the test to get into a magnet school, etc. It leaves devastated neighborhood schools, crumbling like some strip mine in West Virginia.

School data collected in the fall of 2000 reported that Frederick Douglass High had a drop out rate of 9.9% and an average daily attendance of approximately 77% of the total school enrollment. These statistics point to an absentee problem that greatly exceeds the district averages for other public secondary schools in the state. On the other hand, at McDonogh 35, which is a college preparatory school, the same statistics report an average daily attendance of 96.4% and a drop out rate of 0.2%. These schools are in close proximity to one another and the students live in many of the same neighborhoods,

but the learning environments created by political and social inequities leave a chasm between the populations. As citizens, these young people could be defined simply by the schools they attend and the opportunities they are afforded in their school experience. To contest these limitations, students need the tools to make their education meaningful in the context of their lived experience and neighborhood realities.

The architects of educational democracy theory focus on looking at the inequities within school systems as a platform that can create pedagogies of active learning. John Dewey (1963), Paulo Freire (1970), Jean Piaget (1979) and James Comer (1980) argue for methods to integrate school and community through participatory learning that promotes cognitive as well as affective development. As Freire's well-known "banking" concept of education, and Dewey's "pouring in" metaphor illustrate, traditional pedagogies condition students to be passive absorbers of information authorized by teachers and texts.

Ira Shor (1992) argues in *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* that problem-posing can reformulate curriculum and present knowledge and themes of study that challenge the dominant culture. This process stresses that the daily cultural practices and social experience of students can be the setting for liberating action that begins with the cultural knowledge of the community (King, 1995; King & Mitchell, 1990; Rodney, 1975). The Students at the Center program grew out of this kind of praxis-oriented research and learning driven by students' needs and experiences, and has evolved into a series of courses designed to hone students' communication skills as they develop, research, and conduct community projects.

As a veteran educator, Joyce Chapital contends that this process is vital for teachers and students, and should include coalitions of community members as active partners. Her project, which focused on a neighborhood and its connection to other social justice struggles in local history, is one example of the kind of collaboration that gives learning a specific meaning in time and place. The Lawless High School students who worked with her class were participants in a peer education theater troupe that grew out of a collaboration between their school-based health clinic, Planned Parenthood, and Students at the Center. The Louisiana Division of the Arts provided funding for performance artists to develop the students' acting skills and production techniques. Community artist Kathy Randels worked with the Positive Outreach Leaders (POL) three times a week for six months after school to create *Lower Nine Stories*.

Though not a teacher, Kathy regularly leads workshops and classes on theater and performance, and has worked for several years at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women. But finding ways to work with students posed unique problems. Though there was little space in district school to work on projects that blended performance and community research, after school she had to compete with family obligations, job commitments, and other pressures that make extracurricular activities difficult to maintain. She claims that early on she realized that the best place to build lasting relationships with the youth in the neighborhoods where she was working was in school. According to Kente Williams, a former POL member who still performs scenes from the play on stages around the country, the effort put into that production gave Lawless High School local roots that were worth preserving:

From the beginning we knew that we were fighting against violence that destroys our people, drugs that poison our people and racism of all kinds that hinder our people. We are still fighting for devotion to our community, trust to steer us together and hope to keep us together. There is so much history and so many memories, it would be impossible not to fight for home. (*Our Voice*, May 1998, Volume 1, Issue 1).²

Looking back on what it meant to incorporate research, writing, and public presentations into the course curriculum, Joyce claims that it revolutionized the students' learning experience. As one of the three teachers to pilot SAC during the 1997-1998 school year, she believes the course made it possible to envision using pedagogy to engage in activities that build community on multiple levels. This effort, which begins in individual classrooms has clear implications for building effective coalitions at the district level and with the larger community. Joyce claims:

My whole perspective as a writing teacher shifted. In all my classes there was more discussion and interaction. For example, when we read *A Plymouth Plantation*, I had students analyze the hardships of people coming over to America. Then I asked students to think about their own hardships they had overcome and they chose one as a subject to write about. Well, those papers were some of the most revealing I've read. I formed bonds with those students that last. I learned about the personal lives of my students. One student had never stayed in any home for more than three months in her high school career, and I marvel now that this child is going to graduate this year.

She goes on to stress the ways this work can enhance leadership within a school and build partnerships at multiple levels:

Administrations can also serve as important conduits between SAC students and other parts of the school system because we have access to the system, the school board and the superintendent. We can also help them make contacts with business partners in the community because it's easier for me to make phone contact with

² *Our Voice* is teen newspaper distributed throughout New Orleans secondary school, and is written, edited and graphically designed by students. *Our Voice* is a collaborative project developed by Students at the Center, the Crescent Peace Alliance, and the Institute for Women & Ethnic Studies.

people in the community than it is for teachers in the classroom. Those are just some of the things that administration can do to support SAC students.

Encouraging school administrators to use innovative models for teaching in urban schools is not a new idea. Many educators have argued that this is the only way to craft effective education policy for district reform. But as I will discuss later, some critics suggest that special programs offer little utility to changing public education because of the difficulty in “scaling up” their successes (Stone, 1999). I contend that this argument begs the question of whether programs that begin in schools can create better learning experiences for students.

In school sites like McDonogh 35 and Douglass, students are differently prepared for the roles assigned to them by economic structures of their urban environment. As an apparatus of the state, public schools contribute to the mechanisms of capitalism by “sorting, selecting, and certifying a hierarchically organized student body” that is reinforced by school curricula (Apple, 1993, 1985, 1983, p. 17). This results in a discursive relationship between culture and power, which is manifested in the hidden curriculum that legitimizes a Eurocentric perspective on history and culture in schools. These forces situate the school in a social labyrinth that translates to varied forms of what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls “cultural capital” that molds students in a market-based society that unevenly distributes resources and opportunities to poor children and their families.

The processes of social reproduction that takes place in schools and the value it places on youth based on their culture and class, is well noted by Marxist theorists (Althusser, 1971; Apple, 1985; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Everhart, 1979; Willis, 1977).

For the poor, the working class, and students of color, their power base does not come from the legitimation and accumulation of cultural and economic capital that is facilitated by their schooling. Critical education theory suggests that it comes instead through forms of cultural resistance and autonomy that they exert in the face of hegemonic conditioning. In echo to Joyce's comments, leftist scholars of curriculum and its relationship to the ideologies at work schools have noted the importance of examining "the form the curriculum takes, not only its content.... For a variety of economic, political and ideological reasons, a large amount of curricula in the United States is organized around individualization" (Apple, 1993, p. 28).

What does this mean in the current political environment for the practical task of making a connection between pedagogy, curriculum, and schools as public institutions? In answer to this question, some attention should be given to theorists of structuralism and ethnomethodological studies who attempt to understand the ways that students and teachers negotiate their roles in schools. This scholarship focuses on both internal and external conditions that position human subjects by examining internal forces, such as the mechanisms within schools that influence the realities of students and teachers-- and external forces, such as inequitable economic conditions and the cultural forces that create structural conditions in public education.³

It is important to note that the focus of many education initiatives revolve around either internal or external structures, and do not address the interplay of these processes. I will attempt to show the Students at the Center grew out of a concern for both facets of

³ In his work on New Orleans, Miron (1996) refers to an external force that structures inner-city schooling as social elites that he calls the Entrepreneurial Coalition. In simple terms, this group exemplifies the historical relationship between business leaders and school governance strategies, one that has gained prominence in the effort to align schools with the needs of the global economy.

this discourse. In the remainder of this chapter I describe the efforts made to address the internal mechanisms of urban schooling, and later I turn to the external forces structuring the conditions in city schools.

Building a Movement: Public Education as Political Practice

During my time spent in SAC classrooms I witnessed many discussions on the nature of schooling and implications of policies like state standards and the proposed voucher system in public education. These dialogues always flowed from the idea that youth should use their voices to transform schools from within by working with others in the community. This kind of postmodern vision of urban schools sees the multiple roles that students and teachers live out in different social spaces as fertile ground for reorganizing schools and curriculum (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991). Though there are numerous strands of postmodernism, a central tenet of this theoretical position is the deep concern for socially constructed views of reality, which can provide important insights for educators. In short, postmodernism offers tools to encourage pluralism that give support to notions of democracy as lived community, and that allow for multiple and contingent ways of life. When I asked Jim how collaborations with community partners became a part of his teaching practice, he indicated that it evolved from his belief that public education should extend the context of student learning. Jim says:

The first time I really started doing it was when I started teaching Black Studies at 35. I was teaching AP English and principal was saying, ‘What can we do to boost test scores?’ I said that one thing that would help is if I had the students for longer. This was about 1994-95, when Erica DeQuir was part of my class.

But in the past I had mainly taught within the classroom developing their writing skills really well. Well now I'm teaching Black Studies, and decided one thing that was really important from the little bit that I knew about what would be an African perspective, is to make the education more communal than it had been.

He asserts this approach changed his practice as a teacher in significant ways:

In the past I had been really working them hard and developing their skills, and in some ways there are benefits to that. You can get a lot done if you just narrow your focus. But switching to teaching Black Studies made me begin thinking, 'How do I widen the circle of teaching in the class I am working with?' I remember we were reading Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* and having Robert Smith come in, who had been in the Black Panther Party in New Orleans, so he could give his take on that whole thing. So it started as an attempt to teach from a more communal perspective, to have elders talk about books with students, that was the start of it (J. Randels, personal interview, January 2001).

In order to use community dialogue as part of the course, the students had to become part of a large community of learners that self-consciously rethought the purposes of public education. In so doing, they also began to theorize their subjectivity and identity in the face of conflict, and as members of a collective in a "struggle for self and social-determination" (Giroux, 1997, p. 204). SAC started by branching out into the community with a series of book discussions at Community Book Center so students could talk about key texts they were reading with elders, parents, or other faculty members at the school.

This approach gives critical pedagogy and organic praxis important currency in the discourse on urban schools and community. By replacing a static philosophy of discovering truth and objective reality with a diverse set of tools for interpreting culture, the value of human activity in a specific historical and social context can become a part of student learning. I believe that this is important for every young person, but particularly for those living in urban areas that are depicted in the public discourse as economic and social wastelands. Even students in urban schools that are faring relatively

well cannot escape the forgone conclusion that public schooling in the city will inevitably fail to provide them with an adequate education to improve their life circumstances.

As Erica DeQuir points out, students who are engaged in their own learning process are still affected by a public discourse that reduces students and entire schools to representations of success or failure. When she talks about her role in founding Students at the Center, Erica recalls:

When Mr. Randels talked about getting funding for our idea, at the time I didn't think I was skilled enough to write a grant. I guess it was lack of self-esteem from being in these schools, I mean I thought we were good, but I still felt, 'This is just 35. Why don't kids at one of the higher rated schools in city do this?' I just really didn't think we could pull it off. After revising continuously—over and over—and over again, we got it together, and we had a meeting with the grants person out of Clemson University, Dixie Goswami from Write to Change. We met and just kind of talked and shared our feelings about writing, and everything, and then later we got the grant (E. DeQuir, personal interview, September 2001).

Though Erica and her co-writer Kenyatta Johnson did not know it, their work stood firmly in the academic tradition that is known among scholars of English as Writing for the Community. When Erica and Kenyatta met Dixie Goswami in 1997 they were unaware that Goswami had pioneered scholarship on the pedagogical need for precisely the type of learning experience that Jim was involved in: learning that placed young people as researchers and writers using real communication skills and addressing real-world issues. Goswami and her colleagues, first at the American Institutes for Research in the late 1970s, and later at the Bread Loaf School of English in 1979, were among the first to advocate for a process method of writing instruction to give students a voice in the multiple domains of their community. Five years after she helped to create the program, Erica returned to New Orleans after graduating from the college in St. Louis

with a history degree and became a SAC teacher. The 2001-2002 school year was her first year teaching in classrooms at Frederick Douglass and her alma mater, McDonogh 35.

Forming Alliances: Students as Empowered Citizens

Write to Change, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that currently operates as part of the Literacy and Community Service Networks of Clemson University. It supports projects that show ways that communities can and should create spaces of learning in classrooms, universities, and neighborhoods. Part of its organizational mission is to help support learning activities that are imaginatively created for students to build their knowledge through hands-on experience and problem-solving (Benson & Christian, with Goswami & Gooch, 2002).⁴ Dixie's interest in the SAC program and its method of teaching is its demonstration of her belief that "young people are resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved."

She argues that there are five key learning opportunities that public education should provide: 1) students should become researchers that gather, analyze and apply information from a variety of sources; 2) students should become writers that publish for different audiences; 3) students should collaborate on cross-cultural and cross-generational work where they make decisions and solve problems with the help of others; 4) students should master skills that go beyond the basics of educational standards and

⁴ A story about Students at the Center written by Jim Randels and student Ebony Carriere appears as a chapter in the edited volume *Writing to Make a Difference: Classrooms Projects for Community Change* (2002). The chapter describes the development of *Lower Nine Stories* and its eventual performance in the Environmental Justice Arts Festival sponsored by Junebug Productions in May 1998.

assessment frameworks; and 5) students should connect academic activity with community service and the world of work.

As progressive education theorists point out ultimately, the goal is “to affirm the voices that students bring with them to school as they challenge the separation of school knowledge from the experience of everyday life” (Apple 1990; Aronowitz & Giroux 1990; Fine, 1991; Giroux 1992; McLaren 1989; Mohanty 1989; Simon 1992; Trend 1992). Over time I came to recognize each of these principles as they operated in classroom assignments and community partnerships that I observed. As I will describe in later chapters, I also came to see that using these principles to interpret student work and educational accountability suggests an alternative paradigm for building a relationship between neighborhoods and schools.

The SAC model demonstrates that the first step in preparing urban youth to question dominant social structures is finding the value in their own realities and voices. As a high school junior, Kenyatta Johnson described the ways that sharing stories and discussing issues with other young people in writing class cannot only help students to build their communication and problem-solving skills, but can also help them process personal traumas. In her written contribution to the original grant that funded Students at the Center, Kenyatta argued that funding to create small classes for the program can have a significant impact on personal and community issues. She wrote:

A lot of teens have thoughts in their minds of things they want to talk about, but don't feel confident on how to express these thoughts. For instance, I've often been angry about racial issues, the way my father treats me, the prevalence of senseless violence in our community. But because of my fears of negative attitudes about my feelings, I tend to get frustrated and therefore close myself up in a shell. Recently, I've started writing my thoughts on a regular basis and this has helped me to control my temper and improve the way I treat people. Last

summer, I remember a frustration with my father that made me suicidal. There was no one I could share my feelings with. I started writing, and it helped me to cope with my suicidal feelings and my father. Most teens experience emotional problems, and further exposure to writing can sometimes help them deal with their problems like it has helped me (written report, Students at the Center grant proposal, 1996).

On recent visit to New Orleans in March of 2002, Dixie made her sixth trip to meet with students, community members, and public school educators to support the work of Students at the Center. Her return to New Orleans was prompted by a plan to deepen the collaboration that she has cultivated with SAC over the years, by developing a summer institute for teachers in the New Orleans Public School System. As she sat in the circle at the Community Book Center with local artists, university partners, and students from McMain Magnet School, Frederick Douglass, and McDonogh 35, Dixie affirmed her belief that teachers need to use liberating pedagogies to be effective:

SAC is the best example of that I've ever seen that treats young people as the most under-used resources in education. It is a joy and challenge for us to help to make this work visible because it is a powerful model for other schools and communities. We are not advocating that the program go beyond its local roots, but so many places are facing the same challenges. They are looking to find alternative ways to create small learning environments, and can learn from SAC (D. Goswami, collaborators meeting, February 2002).

If students are to be oriented to a democratic transformation of society by their active citizenship, more widespread practices of participatory learning are necessary to challenge the unilateral authority of schools (Shor, 1992). Teachers like Jim and Joyce Chapital attest to the importance of collaborating with community partners, but in city schools teachers are rarely encouraged to work in close-knit learning environments with their peers, or with their students.

For Jim, his role as educator provided the basis for political action that meant looking first at the internal structures of schools. As a classroom teacher, the power to effect large-scale change as one individual in an urban school system is infeasible without a network of support. But the ability to create situations for students to engage in public discussions about schools and other issues affecting their lives is a feasible first step. *The Power of the Pen*, a newsletter produced by McDonogh 35 SAC students in the spring of 1998, demonstrates that history, action, and the collaborative mission of the program serve as a platform for students to infuse visions of democracy into their educational experience. Students felt that it was important to document the beginnings of the program and build on its community partnerships as they looked ahead. They described Students at the Center in following terms:

SAC was started as a at the McDonogh 35 in the Fall of 1996. Hibernia Bank, Write to Change, and McDonogh 35 supported the two initial classes. During the summer prior to that pilot year 2 students joined Mr. Randels to write a proposal for a full day of SAC classes. A local foundation funded the program's first full year in 1997-98. Next year SAC will continue at McDonogh 35 and expand to Frederick Douglass High, another New Orleans public school. We will also continue collaborations with community groups like the Crescent City Peace Alliance, Amistad Research Center, and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (*The Power of the Pen*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 1998).

By describing their learning experiences as a means to develop student-centered tools for educational empowerment that combine learning with social purpose, community collaborations are framed as an achievable vehicle for democratic action. It is worth reiterating that the dimensions of culture, power, and democracy are inseparable from this analytical framework. It is important to situate these social mechanisms as integral to a

normative understanding of education practice and politics, where schools are redefined as logical spaces for human agency.

But if the implementation of libratory education requires power, and if the goal of liberation is the use of power for the transformation of society, how does one begin? One reply to this question comes from the wisdom of Paulo Freire who draws a meaningful distinction between systematic education and praxis driven educational projects. Freire warns that the former can only be changed by large-scale political power, while the latter are carried out *with* students while helping to organize those who are oppressed by political systems. Students at the Center is an educational project in this sense, but it carries with it the possibility refashioning the systematic education of which it is a part.

CHAPTER 3

Learning the Language of Empowerment: Urban Research Methods for Community Change

Human agents wield agency through language and this agency creates landscapes through metaphors, whose outcome is the building of roads, towns, and cultures. Landscapes can be regarded as places where social, historical, and geographical conditions allow different voices to express themselves (Folch-Serra, 1990, p. 255).

In Chapter 2, I framed the Students at the Center program by situating it in a cultural politics of community development and student empowerment. Building on that theoretical grounding this chapter further elaborates the research methodology of this study. To begin, a practical overview of the program and its operation in three overlapping domains will help to clarify my method of inquiry. The methodological fine points detailed in this chapter will briefly interrupt the ethnographic emphasis placed on participant voices, and incorporate my process as a researcher into a deeper explication of SAC and its community building techniques. The three areas of the program's operation that will serve as the backdrop for this explication are its institutional context, its community context, and its unique methodology for social action.

As a public education initiative, the context of SAC is its work within a large urban school system. New Orleans Public Schools have been notably plagued with administrative problems and frequent turnovers in the upper echelons of leadership. However, the district's public schools are institutional entities that are under increasing pressure to respond more effectively to state standards and performance measures. These

expectations are placed on urban schools no matter how well, or how poorly, equipped they are to meet the demands of state policies.

Given this disconnect, it comes as no surprise that in New Orleans these external pressures and the local district's response to them are often the catalyst for intense contestation and public debate. These conflicts are multi-layered and steeped in the issues of race and class that are indicative of thorny political struggles over public education (Stone, 2000, 1998). Ultimately these battles affect the student body, the school system staff, and the community at large, and often mobilize vocal parent and citizen groups to protest district policies and procedures.

In this divisive environment Students at the Center was designed to bring together educators and activists by cultivating a space for public discussion, engaged teaching, and interdisciplinary learning. The methodology of reflection and action that SAC advocates relies heavily on institutional partnerships and collective action for school and neighborhood improvement. Pedagogically, the program actively combines politics, culture, and collaboration to help students and community collaborators use their own experience as a criterion of meaning as they probe larger questions of social justice and human rights (Collins, 1990).

Teaching and learning in this way involve problematizing the economic and political forces that shape public education and the conditions in New Orleans' district schools (Apple, 1993, Shor, 1992). Thus, students are encouraged to study the reasons why their public school system is under-resourced and to think critically about the consequences of this reality for their community. As a part of this research and reflection, the cultural and social norms of the students are open to exploration in

connection with their lived experience, their neighborhood environment, and the larger society.

In practical terms the educational and community-action foci of SAC are tightly woven together. Ontologically and epistemologically, the program's method of teaching and learning is inseparable from its academic and community outcomes. Curricula and collaborations among students, teachers, and community members evolve, as social issues become a source of academic learning and the collective investigation of tangible neighborhood problems. In this way SAC's model of education, participation, and action braid together the institutional, community, and methodological strands of the program. Uniting public education (in the institutional context) to collaborative action (in its methodological and community contexts) required special linkages to be made and reinforced a process of authentic citizen participation.

Linking Education with Empowerment: Agency, Praxis, and Justice

A major emphasis of this research is examining the mechanisms of individual and collective empowerment that are strengthened through knowledge and action. Because of its collaborative approach, the vision of community that Students at the Center fosters depends on effective support networks. The program is predicated on the belief that partnerships and coalitions are the building blocks of embedded democratic education that can contribute to community development. Key principles of the SAC program and its vision of placed-based and historically rooted pedagogy follow the conceptualization

of community development as pursuit of solidarity and agency (Young and Subban, 1996; Bhattacharya, 1995).

In this way, a study of Students at the Center offers a normative approach to neighborhood development that requires participating in community dialogue, identifying the symptoms of community distress, and using the public sphere as a means to combat disunity, noncooperation, and oppression in urban communities (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 1997, p. 17). This research emphasizes the possible connections between teachers, students, and community partners by looking at the ways the partnerships between citizens who live and work in urban neighborhoods can address issues of their collective concern.

Admittedly, there are other ways to construct interpretative frameworks for this extended case study. In fact, in the first grant from the local foundation that continues to fund SAC at multiple sites, eight key programmatic objectives are outlined, including two focused on training teachers and students in the SAC method, two focused on improved writing and critical reading skills across classrooms, two focused on increasing the opportunity for small group instruction and additional services, and two focused specifically on community engagement.¹

Researchers focused solely on the traditional measures of educational success might look to the eight key objectives as the conceptual map to test effective techniques for increasing academic achievement in youth populations normally labeled “at risk.” I

¹ Quarterly reports to this funding agency summarize progress on delineated objectives via action plans and outcome measures. The six objectives that emphasize pedagogy, address training SAC teachers and students on writing and critical reading, and teach students to become researchers and school mentors. In an effort to extend the classroom into neighborhood contexts, the program includes Objective 7: To involve students in research, writing, and service projects to understand and/or improve their school and community; and Objective 8: To disseminate work completed by SAC students, and teachers within the school, in other New Orleans Public Schools, and to local, regional, and nation audiences.

argue that such an approach fails to address the need for a deeper understanding of city schools, their community contexts, and “local sociologies, or representational and material politics, economics and cultural histories,” of the stakeholders in urban education (Luke, p. 84; in Smith and Wexler, 1995). It is my position that students from poor neighborhoods and marginalized racial groups are greatly “at risk,” but the threat to their success as learners begins when they are devalued in their encounters with conventional public education. The research questions that I pose arise from the belief that reforming urban education and rebuilding inner cities in the service of socioeconomic parity are symbiotic processes (Anyon, 1997). The original research question that led me to explore the reach of Students at the Center was, how can public schools play a role in activist grassroots community development? And more specifically, how can urban students apply their classroom learning to the problems that they face each day in their everyday lives?

Teaching the Process of Collaboration

When searching for a method to analyze the multiple contexts of Students at the Center into a research design, the program’s objectives are inadequate for constructing a framework for the full parameters of this study. When approaching the initial research questions however, the basic outline of the program does lend itself to an appropriate structure for categorizing data by helping participants think about processes that support their work. When talking with teachers about the relationship between the objectives of

SAC and its basic programmatic emphases, four themes are emerged: training, academic skill building, creating capacity, and community action.

Teaching students community-based research skills are the component of Students at the Center that links public education with equitable social change. As a part of this training and skill building, Participatory Action Research (PAR) techniques are infused into the classroom pedagogy. Student-centered activities are the crux of SAC and are designed to help young people “identify themselves as knowing actors define their reality; shape their new identities and name their history and transform their lives for themselves” (Callaway, 1981; Fernandes & Tandon, 1981; Gaventa, 1993; Horton, 1990; Humphries & Truman, 1994; Maguire, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983; in Sohng, 1995, p. 4).

Learning from these activities was central to my dialogue with SAC collaborators. We often discussed the importance of local knowledge when developing participatory research skills and frameworks for action that help to build strong communities. Ongoing conversations with students and teachers, organizers, artists, and activists influenced a research process defined by a collective of community stakeholders. In many cases the space for collective activity was sustained through coalitional partnerships and “the conscious creation of both networks of action and a general sense of purpose among the actors involved” (Stone, 2001, p. 157). With this collaborative structure, groups of students and community members exchanged information to begin to analyze systemic community problems like urban decay, racism, and poverty by looking at their personal experiences and neighborhood surroundings to in terms of wider systems (Nelson and Wright, 1995).

These processes were designed as a form of collective learning that advocates of traditional community organizing have called “teach-ins” (Fullilove and Fullilove, 1999). Robert and Mindy Fullilove (1999) are scholars of public health who have studied the impact of urban dislocation brought about by federal policy. Their research describes neighborhood change in inner city communities, as it began with urban renewal in the 1950s and continues with the dismantling of public housing by HOPE VI in the 1990s. As researchers, public health scholars, and clinical psychiatrists, they argue that community-learning efforts similar to Students at the Center are fundamental to the revitalization of urban neighborhoods. Employing teach-ins as a method of participatory research engages citizens in talking about the importance of community and developing courses of action to rebuild their neighborhood. When describing a community-building project in which they participated with citizens of the Hill District of Pittsburgh,² they write:

Teach-ins provided us with a unique opportunity to create a consciousness of place, of community, of dislocation and of the psychological impact of all of these factors.... In order to create the foundations for such conversations, we were trying to teach participants a new language about spaces and places and emotion. Moreover, we wanted this language to have the capacity to become the medium for our communication with each other and for our discussion of strategies and tactics for organization (p. 21; in Robin, 1999).

This is the philosophy of Students at the Center. The work that students produce extends learning into the world beyond the classroom and is contextualized in neighborhood life and personal experience. The strategies that come from these conversations are the result of the collaborative process upon which Students at the

² The project is summarized in a report, *Hillscapes: Envisioning a Healthy Urban Habitat* (1999) and was funded by the Maurice Falk Medical Fund at the University of Pittsburgh Center for Minority Health. As researchers, Fullilove and Fullilove have dedicated a great deal of scholarship to the connections between the forces of displacement in the urban environment and public health issues faced by urban residents.

Center classes are built. This work comes in many forms. In order to connect education with efforts to transform their community, partnerships develop with teachers and local activists. These collectives engage in collaborative community development practices that urban anthropologist Setha Low (1999) describes as,

“Spatializing culture” by locating social relations and social practice in space, both physically and metaphorically.... Images of the “contested city” with attempts to invert the urban power structure through symbolic control of the streets, and a broad range of contemporary examples of urban struggle and resistance (p. 10-11).

Participants in SAC classes and community-based studies look for ways that their work could be expanded, documented, and shared with others. Over time, students, teachers, and their community partners began to see research publications, public forums and policymaking discussions as the arena for the full implementation of their work. Because of the writing focus of the program, questions of audience, voice, and purpose are central themes for all SAC projects. This focus also provided instructive guidelines for the qualitative research techniques that I would use to describe the program. As an ethnographer, my most important task was not in presenting this case as an objective truth, rather it is in producing a credible account of Students at the Center that grounds the study in its multiple contexts.

Understanding context is important for intelligibility and comprehension. The significance of context for interpretation and understanding and the inevitability of reflexivity for all sense making, offers ethnography an additional resource for its authority. Field-workers place themselves in the contexts of experience in order to permit the reflexivity process to work. Experienced ethnographers then do not avoid reflexivity; they embrace it (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, 307).

The importance of reflexivity was true for SAC students and community partners and for me as I participated in extending the reach of their work. Reflexivity refers to the acknowledgment that research processes are influenced by the intimate relationship of the researcher to setting, context, and culture that she or he is trying to understand (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 278). Issues of representation, reporting, and the related challenges of interpretation and voice are fundamental to all aspects of the research (Snow and Morrill, 1993, p. 8). This approach necessarily examines the criteria it uses when interpretive or explanatory statements are made, such that questions of validity can no longer be answered strictly with claims to pure knowledge or truth (Altheide and Johnson, p. 278; in Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

As SAC participants sought ways to use their work to contribute to public dialogues about education reform and community building, clearly explaining the purpose of the program and its model of collaboration were of central concern. The group of collaborators involved in actively writing and talking about the program came to see that one aspect of describing SAC in its multiple contexts was showing the critical linkage between what they knew as a community of learners and how they knew it (Altheide and Johnson, p. 301). For this reason, developing a method to help others see public education through the lens of social transformation was fundamental to Students at the Center.

During the course of my work I witnessed several distinct processes that explicitly linked the educational and community frameworks of the program. These steps were used to link education, empowerment, and social change “to produce a new type of community study...able to capture the economic and social complexities found in our newest forms

of inner city neighborhoods” (Abu-Lughod, 1994; in Low, 1999, p. 11). Summarizing this approach in categorical terms I describe these steps as contesting patterns of social injustice, building community networks, validating new methods of learning, and reconstructing urban space. This is the operationalized definition of collective empowerment articulated by the Students at the Center program.

In talking with SAC participants it became clear to me that these steps were indicative of their process for applying learning concepts and materials in their neighborhoods (see Figure 3a). I began to see clear parallels between the programmatic emphases of Students at the Center and its process for fighting injustice. We talked about the collective actions of small groups of SAC actors in the framework of larger community networks, citywide institutions, and the structures shaping state and national policies. These collaborative efforts were discussed by students, teachers, and community partners as a form of agency that we believed had the potential to effect change in their schools and neighborhoods.³

In exploring ways to build on the early successes of the program and share them with others, our participatory research process began with the assumption that empowering education can serve as a bridge between human agency and the fight for social justice in its urban community. Freire (1970) labeled the process succinctly by calling it a successful “pedagogy of the oppressed” praxis, or empowerment based on a education, reflection, and action. Conversations with teachers, students, and community

³ The use of human agency, as it is defined here, is borrowed from (Miron, 1996) and applies to the intentional capacity of people to identify and implement alternatives in a field of identity politics and societal relations that are structurally unequal. This work is an expression of power and resistance. The concept of human agency is relevant not only for individuals, but also for collective forms of struggle that are linked to civil rights and other social movements (Mouffe, 1988, Haymes, 1995, Gilroy, 1991)

partners guided the research and theoretically linked education, agency and collective empowerment. Graphically linking these processes aided a conceptual understanding of the program and helped to probe the deeper issues that underpin Students at the Center projects.

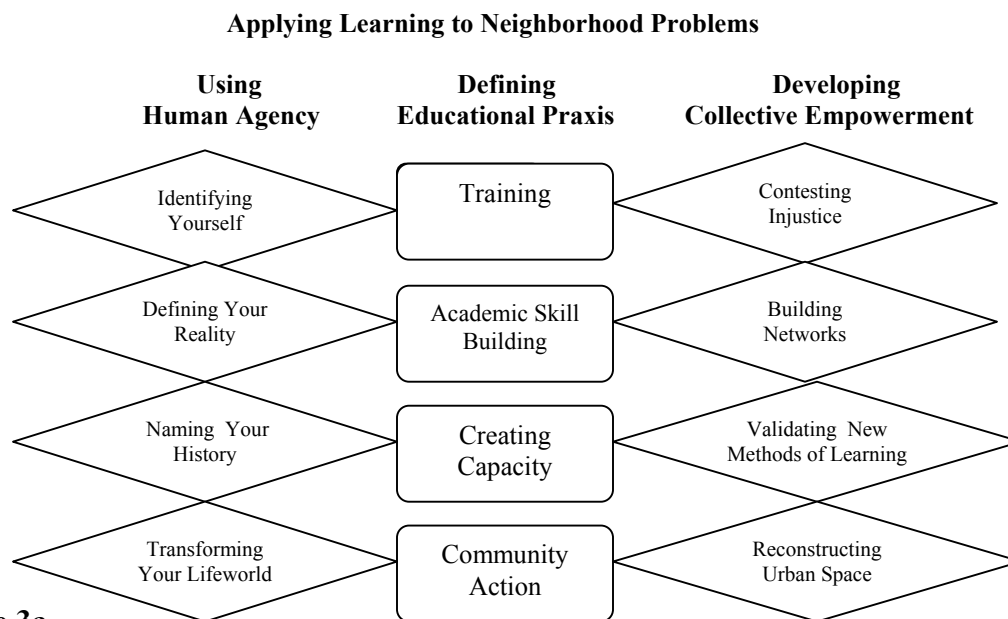


Figure 3a.

Participatory Action Research Methods

In the remainder of this chapter and continuing into the next, I will tease out the connections between educational praxis and the evidence of human agency that shapes the subjective experience of school and community life (Herr & Anderson, 1993; Miron & Lauria, 1998). In the pages to follow, key tenets of empowering pedagogy, theories of action research, and examples of grassroots neighborhood development will rub against one another in significant ways. Students at the Center offers an example of the varied

ways that knowledge can play a crucial role in enabling people to participate in deciding how they would like to see their world operate (Gaventa, 1988).

It is my assertion that applying the theory of PAR is a concrete way for diverse coalitions of community members to take part in crafting their own vision of community development. Originally conceived as a method for engaging disenfranchised people in research on their own communities, PAR is used as a mechanism to help citizens pursue answers to questions that arise from their daily struggles for survival (Brown, 1978; Fals-Borda, 1979; Freire, 1974, 1970; Hall, 1981; Sohng, 1995; Tandon, 1981). People have long been interested in acting on their own behalf and protecting their living environment, but PAR focuses on the transformative possibilities of research as collective action (Park, 1993).

The description to follow accentuates collaborative methods of SAC as a process of participatory research that evolves from the culture, history, and demography of its urban community. The academic curricula of the program are directly linked to the community development goals and activist partnerships it builds to meet identified community needs. For SAC, public schools provide the institutional and theoretical jumping off place for collaboration and community improvement to build critical consciousness. These goals mirror the three key goals of the PAR, which Randy Stoecker (1997) describes as 1) learning knowledge and skills relevant to the tasks at hand, 2) developing relationships of solidarity, and 3) engaging in effective action that wins victories and builds self-sufficiency (p. 9).

This case study is based on the principles of action research, therefore methods of data collection and analysis evolved from a wide array of academic and neighborhood

partnerships that Students at the Center facilitated. There were no disagreements about who would control the research process or ultimately owned the data. As a participatory researcher and partner to the program, my central task was to determine how I would support the program in the key decisional points in the PAR process, including 1) defining their own questions for study and research, 2) designing research projects that build skills and relationships, 3) implementing collaborative research methods that benefit the community, 4) analyzing data in context with the participation of community members, and 5) reporting the results publicly and use the learning process to initiate action (see Figure 3b).

The process of this study was cyclical and self-generating in accordance the research produced by collaborative SAC projects. There were times when I facilitated aspects of the community dialogue and thinking about ways to use research effectively, but Students at the Center always provided a clear framework for implementing partnerships that relied on reflection and action. In time, community networks were developed among teachers, students, and other stakeholders to link multiple collaborations and mobilize collective resources for community initiatives. Along with its formula for social justice, SAC used the cycle of action research to generate new forms of knowledge.⁴

In presenting the methodology of this study, I mix the discourse on research methods that are participatory, action-oriented, and politically engaged, with examples of

⁴ As Habermas (1972) argued, knowledge is developed and used in the context of different kinds of human interests. *Communicative interaction* is one conduit for knowledge that involves the transmission of meaning and in a system of signs, conventions, and concepts that are negotiated by people in the course of social interaction. As such, participatory research is “a way of seeing and a form of knowing that employs historical knowledge, reflexive reasoning and dialectic awareness to give people some tools to realize new potential for the emancipation and enlightenment of ordinary individuals” (Sohng, 1995, p. 13).

this process as I experienced it. Struggles over power and resources are endemic to this account. Contesting injustice with PAR means amplifying the discourses of “ordinary” people (Foucault, 1980) who are silenced by researchers and policymakers who do not seek meaningful community input. This silencing (Fine, 1991) is rooted in unequal relations of knowledge that are reflected in “access to information, in the production and definition of legitimate knowledge, and in the domination of expertise over common knowledge in decision making” (Sohng 1995, p. 3). As Sohng points out,

Today this ideology manifests itself in the deference of the people to the expert, and ultimately the subordination of their own experiences and personal meanings to expertise. As a result, decisions affecting ordinary people are shown to be based on “expert” knowledge, denying the rationality of individual citizens and their life experiences. Understanding human nature and the problems of living becomes the purview of scientists, rendering people and their experiences dependent on experts to explain and oversee their life experiences.... Underlying all of these elements of the power of expertise is the expert/s lack of accountability to the ordinary people affected by his or her knowledge.

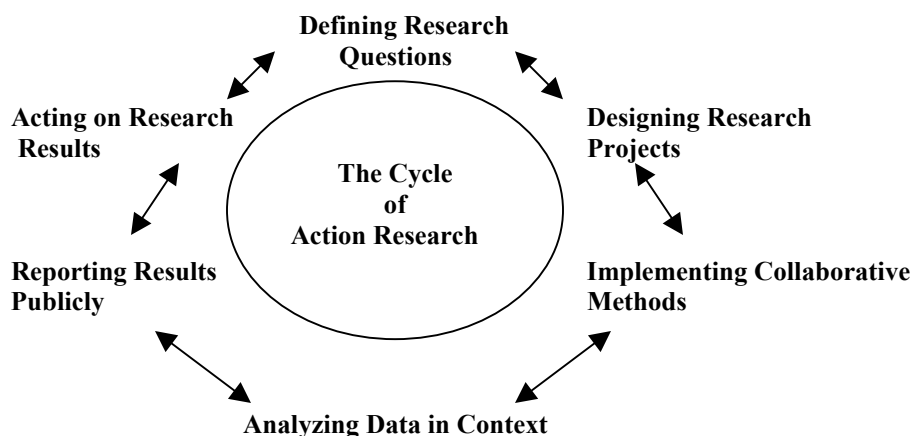


Figure 3b.

Students at the Center pointedly refashions top-down frameworks of educational accountability and creates a communal process for learning that is grounded in neighborhood engagement. This vision has implications for urban educational discourse,

neighborhood and community planning initiatives, and activist movements in urban spaces. As I address methodological considerations of this research more specifically, the time and place in which this study occurs serve as both the background and an important character in the story of Students at the Center. In order to describe my place in the methodological process of the program, I must also provide the theoretical grounding for the lessons I learned during my fieldwork. The theories of education and empowerment that I used follow the simultaneous collecting, coding, and analysis of data from the first day in the field (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p. 133). This is the process of grounded theory, wherein studies grow out of questions researchers ask about people in specific contexts as they discover and conceptualize the essence of specific interactional processes (Glaser, 1978). As Sherman and Webb (1988) claim in educational settings where the grounded theory method is employed:

Data collection begins as soon as the researcher has identified a researchable problem and goes into the field. Once a setting has been chosen for study, the researcher immerses herself in the social milieu. Initial observations allow the researcher to describe the social structure, observe patterns of behavior, and begin to understand the environment. Since grounded research requires interpersonal interaction, the researcher must observe her own behavior as well as the behavior of the subjects (p. 130).

The section to follow describes the role that I played at each step in the PAR process of Students at the Center. My activities with the participants were varied and differently negotiated according to the needs of the collective. Redefining the nature of knowledge and taking social action are fundamental to participatory research (Park, 1997). As a participant researcher, these tasks became part and parcel of my immersion in

the social environment and my understanding of the lived experience of SAC participants.

Step 1: Defining the Research Questions & Conceptualizing the Research Process

When I came to Students at the Center I joined its process of community education and collaboration. In this capacity, I played multiple roles—first as participant observer, then as action researcher, and finally as an academic partner to program. The issues of access that are common in many school-based research studies were mitigated by my contribution to the PAR element of the program, which teaches qualitative research techniques to students with the help of community partners. Action research became a strategy for community building by teaching urban students how to think about their education as a means for conducting their own studies that examine community issues.

In an effort to document the complexities of this process in its multiple school and community contexts, I found myself in a position that I did not fully anticipate. Park (1997) describes this researcher fluidity during the PAR process:

Social scientists often play facilitating roles as participant researchers. Researchers' roles are more than a hired hand that can provide technical skills. They share their intellectual understanding of the situations as personal concerns with the community partners, so that it can be considered together with input from other sources when planning projects, and negotiating with different segments of the community, including those who have power and vested interests in promoting a particular stance (pp. 12-13).

According to Peter Park, academics and citizen groups can form partnerships based on democracy, community needs, and deliberate problem solving “to address

practical problems that arise in the daily struggles for material, psychic and social well-being” (1997, p. 8). This is one of the cornerstones of participatory action research.⁵ Park shares his approach to social research with noted sociologists, like Randy Stoecker (1997) who argues,

In any participatory research projects there are three goals to be achieved for all participants: learning something, developing relationships, and acting more effectively. Doing research is not the goal in itself but only a means. Achieving these goals require that four functions be fulfilled: “animator,” community organizer, popular educator and participatory researcher.⁶ (1997, p.1)

Each of these roles requires active engagement with citizens, who are applying research as, “simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action ” (Gaventa, 1991, p.121-122, in Stoecker, 1997). Learning and skill building are essential to this process if community groups are to develop the capacity for research and action to meet their needs and address real-world problems. In this way, education can be defined as “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1962) and expanded to include strategies to develop, reappropriate, and participate in the social production of useable knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1991; Park, 1997; Sohng, 1995; Stoecker, 1997).

Such transformative processes cannot be achieved without developing frameworks for learning and action that are based on shared power and cogenerative dialogue (Fear & Edwards, 1995). Participatory research techniques are so designed, and

⁵ Park stresses that in PAR people identify problems and conduct research for real purposes, not for theoretical abstractions offered by experts. This ensures that when addressing social problems, community participants develop the capacity to do the actual research according to their needs. In this way true participatory research is inherently democratic in its aims and its methods.

⁶ This quote is taken from a paper presented at the American Sociological Society Annual Meeting in 1997, entitled, *Are Academics Irrelevant: Roles for Scholars in Participatory Research*. A revised version was later published in the *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 42, 1999.

intentionally shift power and decision-making control into to the hands of community members so they become self-sufficient researchers and activists (Stoecker, 1997).

Stoecker argues that this approach is necessary for research to be authentically empowering for a community. Rather than using research as a finite academic exercise, he believes, “it’s a community organizing and/or development project of which the research is only one piece” (1997, p. 8).

From the beginning, my role in SAC activities was defined by the goals of the students, teachers, and activist partners that constitute the program’s community of learners. Over time, their interest in my skills as a researcher evolved in accordance with their desire to include me as a participant in various projects that developed collaboratively.⁷ SAC staff and community partners always initiated my deepened involvement and substantive contributions to various aspects of the program.

Eventually I became an active partner in neighborhood development projects and served as a resource for strengthening the community collaboration and research activities of Students at the Center. Two years into this study, I was named one of three program “co-directors” along with the SAC founder and another classroom teacher. As a co-director I helped participants coordinate their curricula with action projects and possible partnerships. I was called upon to help SAC actors respond to requests from a growing network of community members that was interested in developing collaborative projects. In the initial phase of this research, documenting the process of SAC provided

⁷ Stoecker and other scholars who use participatory research methods emphasize the community must always define the research question, though an academic partner can initiate the process of developing the question. In each of the ensuing steps in PAR projects, the community and the academic collaborate and learn from one another based on their existing strengths and skills. This process is used for designing the research, implementing the research design, analyzing the research data, reporting the findings, and acting on research results.

emergent concepts that defined the substantive codes of this study, including *collaboration, learning environments, social justice, schooling, resources, organizing, community improvement, youth development, and training*.

Step 2: Setting the Research in Motion with Organic Epistemologies

Culture and history are the building blocks of Students at the Center projects that connect young people to their urban surroundings, their neighborhood and a larger community ethos.⁸ The terms *culture, history, community, and neighborhood* were the primary categorical frames that arose consistently in the data along with the terms that served as secondary frames, including *pedagogy, research, curriculum, community partnerships, empowerment, and communication skills*. The primary constructs were variously defined but universally understood as fundamental to SAC, while the secondary constructs were discussed and described differently by participants depending on the nature of their work with SAC and their extent of involvement in the program. Stephen Haymes (1995) argues for this kind of theoretical and practical linkage between the social and the cultural spheres of community life and the physical environment that shapes learning. These factors are the basis of a pedagogy of urban place. Haymes asserts that solidarity can arise from “a pedagogy of black urban struggle” that teaches individuals and collectivities to make and take up culture in the production of public spaces in the city:

⁸ In the vernacular, the terms *community* and *neighborhood* are often used interchangeably, but when looked at more closely the concepts carry different connotations (Peterman, 2000). Students at the Center connects its vision of education to both the specific geographies of neighborhoods and the shared ways of living suggested by a broader sense of community. While neighborhoods are place-based locations, communities are often defined by the extent to which “members interact with each other, spend time together, rely on each other, celebrate together, mourn together and simply talk to one another” (Peterman, p. 20).

Black solidarity is a product of black culture. And because culture is about the production of meanings, it shapes or frames the narratives and stories we use to define ourselves in relation to others, the world and ourselves. Black culture in a sense must be understood from the perspective of how it pedagogically organizes black consciousness and black subjectivity.... This means that a pedagogy of black urban struggle must be linked to a ‘politics of location’ and a ‘politics of voices’ that understand the connection between the formation of particular identities, the racial construction of urban myths, and what that means for the material landscape and development of the city (p. 21-22).

The importance of place

Haymes (1995) advances this concept of “place-making” as a way to reclaim public spaces like urban schools and neighborhoods, and battle forces that conspire to warehouse economically disenfranchised African Americans. His theory of pedagogy and place calls for a social re-construction of the city through cultural and historical images, which “reappropriate the dominant radicalized and essentialized meanings of the urban” (1995, p.23). I argue that SAC and its method education (i.e., the reappropriation, development, and social production of useable knowledge) are a response to this call for applied urban pedagogy that considers the importance of culture and identity politics in the social milieu.

Nancy Fraser’s (1991) writings on use of the public sphere also shed light on the salient issues in research that examine the complimentary processes of empowerment and education. Her description of active “counterpublics” helps to bridge the work of Freire (1970) and hooks (1990, 1992) by speaking to the struggle for equality when groups act as a collective to publicly contest their oppression. She asserts:

Subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training ground for agitational activities directed toward wider

publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. (p. 69)

These dimensions of endogenous collaborative action are reflected in the pedagogy of participatory research. In order to examine this phenomena at work in the Students at the Center program, the PAR methodology also reflected the culture-centered research philosophy of SAC. I define this as a method of inquiry that is based on a cultural group's way of knowing, lived experience, and perception of its own social, economic and political reality (Gordon, 1990; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; King, 1995). Its product is culture-centered knowledge that is steeped in the politics and social goals of reciprocity, empowerment, and collective experience (Stansfield, 1993; Bernal, 1998).

The importance of culture

Including cultural perspectives in PAR vehemently resists epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1996). It has been argued that one of the greatest problems facing scholars that do research focusing on people of color and their communities is the biased ideologies that underpin all aspects of the social sciences. According to John Stansfield (1993) these biases manifest themselves in the research paradigms, epistemologies, and methods that produce "a logic of inquiry" based on the Western male worldview. This narrow view permeates the academic cannon and comes from a specific historical and cultural experience. Researchers rarely critically analyze these specificities. Ultimately, the worldview of traditional scientific inquiry is translated into a domain of acceptable or

“legitimate” knowledge that erases the factors of race, gender, and social class as they are situated relative to the Western cultural experience.⁹

Traditional research methodologies in education and community development in urban settings have been criticized for their tendency to distort African American subjectivities, because they do not explicitly unpack issues of race, culture, and lived experience (Stansfield, 1993). The use of limited racial categorizations routinely oversimplifies subject positions in the hierarchy of the American cultural experience and “historical cultural traditions encourage citizens to link phenotypic differences with presumptions about moral character, personality, interpersonal behavior and intelligence” (Stansfield, p.17). This results in racial categorizations that are not problematized by social researchers and that lead to specific misinterpretations of data in both quantitative and qualitative data. Stanfield points out that these ubiquitous assumptions impact research and reflect the ways “the media and schools teach racial categorization through visual and written language” (p.18).

These issues are central to the work of Students at the Center. For this reason I employed what Stansfield and others have referred to as epistemological considerations that emphasize the cultural and political constructs at work in the logic of inquiry:

The study of methodology must begin with questions concerning the life histories of researchers and the embedded norms, values, and beliefs of the institutions, communities, and movements they build, stabilize and transform.... For instance there is a great need for epistemological traditions such as participatory research strategies that would assist research subjects in improving their quality of life as

⁹ Apple (1979, 1993) suggests that culture and economy articulate principles of knowledge production and reproduction, which are ideologically imposed on students. In *Education and Power* (1995) Apple focuses on describing the ways that this process is reinforced by structural entities that create unequal economic and cultural conditions embodied in the “corpus of school knowledge and the hidden curriculum...which are consistently biased towards extant and unequal social regularities” (p.37).

opposed to the impersonal, exploitive conventions of logical positivism (Stansfield, 1993, p. 35).

To combat these methodological fallacies this study is informed by three important guidelines provided by Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998). Bernal makes an important case for research methods that take into account the identity of the researcher and the research participants to counter epistemological racism so that 1) research participants define their realities and use them to become agents of their own knowledge; 2) research subjects are central in examining their lives by using community memory; and, 3) people define themselves according to the interplay of race, gender, and class in their lives and unique social and cultural history. Bernal's self-titled "Chicana feminist epistemology" parallels a growing body of literature on the feminist prospective on urban life and community.

Without taking this stance, traditional paradigms, which are built on the implicit comparison of people of color to whites, can distort research methods, findings, and conclusions. These comparisons are common in social scientific practices that construct urban communities and their residents as "others" and reproduce this perspective, particularly in socializing institutions like schools (Apple, 1993; Aronowitz, 1991; Giroux, 1994; King, 1995).

Setting participatory research in motion, both in conceptual and physical space, with community members moves beyond an acknowledgement of disparity and difference. Many scholars have noted that urban schools are social spaces where collective forms of resistance can be organized to enact agency and the historical pursuit of civil and human rights (Haymes, 1995; Miron and Lauria, 1998; Mouffe, 1988; Smith,

1992). This is particularly important for developing an effective political response to the inequities that shape urban education. As Meacham (1995) points out,

There is no space from which to be distant from the conditions facing education. We are all immersed within processes which are connected to and constitutive of the disparities and inequalities which characterize the educational landscape.... Given the interconnected quality of many of our education issues and problems, many disciplines need to be brought to together simultaneously (p. 405).

The importance of community

Munir Fasheh (1995) points to similar needs within educational discourse when he describes an educational initiative that he co-founded in a Palestinian community in the West Bank of the Gaza Strip.¹⁰ His work is built on the belief that public institutions and social organizations that exist visibly in a community can only yield short-term results without “building community at the invisible level, or human and institutional development level” (p. 70).¹¹ In describing educational activities that address real community issues, Fasheh outlines a process of personal and collective empowerment that provides an alternative vision of schooling that is achieved through specific “sub-levels of community building.”

I have adapted this model to SAC, and found parallels to the cycle of action research, which helps to apply techniques for learning and action (see Figure 3c). With this method, human agency and education can be effectively linked through projects that

¹⁰ In 1989 the Tamer Institute was founded in Palestine by Munir Fasheh and Beth Kuttab. It was designed to counteract the social disintegration of Palestinian community through the development of projects that focus on teacher development, education materials, and seminars that connect community education to community action. By focusing on the needs of children “to express themselves freely and to have role models” Tamer Institute projects utilized theatrical production, creative writing workshops, and networks of “small groups of youth that work within a larger network and with a common purpose and vision.”

¹¹ See Fasheh (1995) for a more detailed definition of community building at the, “invisible level which expands notions of community development beyond the visible symbols, buildings and funds” (p. 70) dedicated to the physical regeneration of disadvantaged communities.

create the capacity for community action. When used to address community needs, this kind of participatory action can prepare human agents to redefine themselves by drawing on their own social and cultural history through the creation of “cultural products” which he calls,

An integral part of community building at the invisible level...which may take the form of articles, books, drawings, songs, plays; ideas methodologies or theories; reading clubs or discussion groups (p. 71).

In sum, Fasheh’s model of teaching and learning merges the purpose and the process of classroom pedagogy and community activity followed by Students at the Center. By using culture, history, and community resources to enhance school-based learning and develop collaborative projects, the program ambitiously aims to its prepare students to contribute to the equitable transformation of society

This philosophical and methodological stance offers a concrete example of critical education and democratic activism which has been described as,

A way of learning that prepares students to act as citizens who question knowledge and society.... To think critically in this process means to examine deep meanings, personal implications and social consequences of any knowledge, theme, technique, text or material. To study something in-depth is to do research. In this sense, research implies detailed investigation, an extensive exploration of subject matter, thought and language. Because the critical democratic classroom involves in-depth scrutiny, it defines students as active researchers who make meaning, not as passive receivers of knowledge (Shor, 1992, p. 169).

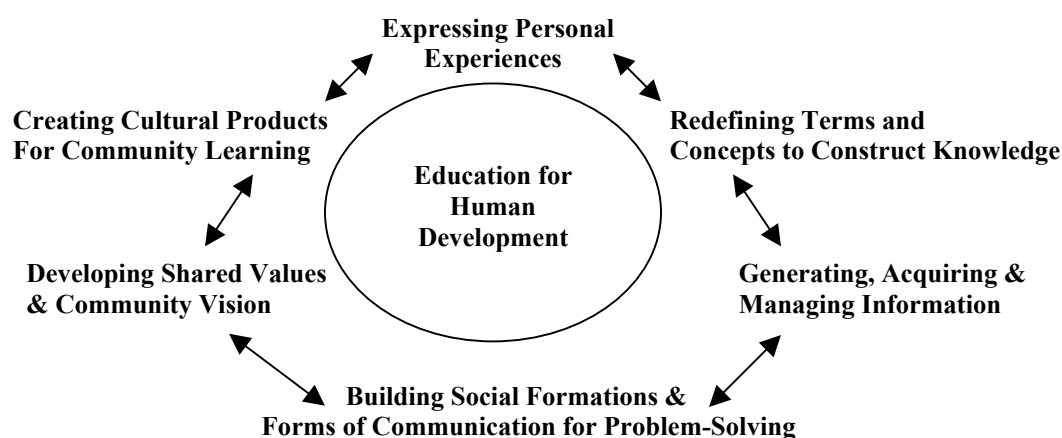


Figure 3c.

Step 3: Implementing the Research Design with Dialogue and Critical Reflection

In my role as researcher and participant observer I learned that the community-based learning methodology of SAC provides a different ontological and epistemological framework for social reality. These new perspectives on the education process challenge the fundamental assumptions about the research relationship, the research process for collecting and analyzing data, and kind of knowledge generated with a praxis for liberation. This study reflects the core concept of *community building* and “illuminates the actors’ behavior and explicates what is going on in the data” (Glaser, 1978, p. 94). Grounded theory methods require that the central concept recurs frequently in the data, links the data together, explains much of the variation in the data, and is the basis for the generation of theory (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p. 133). In the course of this study, the “main theme” arose from continuous reference to the participatory processes of SAC and my own analytical thinking about what was taking place. The theories of *agency*, *praxis* and *collective empowerment* that I drew from have been combined into a theory of the construct for Embedded Social Action.

The limitations imposed by the conventions of schooling are antithetical to true participatory research methods because they “decontextualize the social and political relations, the ideological practices, and symbolic meaning structures in which its discourse is embedded” (Aronowitz, 1991, p. 50). To combat this, SAC uses multiple forms of expression to cultivate different ways of viewing the world by recognizing the voices, languages, experience, and histories of community life. June Jordan (1987) explains the importance of using this work for social justice:

If we lived in a democratic state our language would have to hurtle, fly, curse and sing, in all the common American names, all undeniable and representative and participating voices of everybody here. We would not tolerate the language of the powerful, and thereby, lose all respect for words, per se. We could make our language conform to the truth of our many selves and we would make our language lead us into the equality of power that a democratic state must represent (p. 30; in Aronowitz, 1991).

As research projects were designed, SAC collaborators talked about the need to align education with culture and community building. Each project was discussed in terms of its impact on empowerment and self-determination for students and the community at large. These dialogues were the space for articulating research questions and designed projects to be implemented with the collaborative methods of the program. As a researcher and involved participant in this process, I did not treat student work developed through these partnerships as ethnographic artifacts for my interpretation. Together we discussed the themes and the process of writing and researching in which they were engaged. In turn, students shared their writings and community plans with their classmates and community partners, and attended meetings, performances, and public events to talk about their work and ask for feedback. In the lexicon of qualitative

research, Wolcott (1994) refers to similar participatory methods as description, analysis, and interpretation of data with the culture-sharing group.

Reliability and validity

As the collaborative projects and other student writing and research are presented in the remainder of this study, they will be described in keeping with interpretive categories that participants emphasized as part of their work. From these analytical frames, “patterned regularities” (Spradley, 1979, 1980; Wolcott, 1994) will be shown to draw connections between the SAC participants and the larger socio-political positions that they take up through their community action. As a participant, my contributions to the process came in the form of interpretive feedback on the processes of classroom projects and support for the community building activities emphasized by SAC (Fasheh, 1995).

One of the major arguments of this study focuses on the importance of including study participants and their language, insights, and explanations of their work in the research design, data analysis, and interpretations. As the investigator and a participant in the work of Students at the Center, my research was decidedly collaborative, participatory, and dialogic. Because of this approach, I learned that the people who were a part of the Students at the Center network were quite diverse. Community partners came from varied institutional backgrounds, just as students and teachers come from various school cultures and learning environments.

Choosing a participatory research model for this study required that the research methodologies and their epistemological considerations be inclusive of a wide range of perspectives and subjective positions. As a researcher my task mirrored that of the public

school students and their community partners—to take part in a fluid and expansive learning process that was at work and unfolding. I contend that no other research design would have been appropriate for a study of this nature, where action and research were continually being reformulated and redefined to suit specific circumstances and specific community problems.

Data gathering

The ideological foundations of participatory action research offer a normative perspective on the purpose of embedded academic work and bottom-up community building. For qualitative researchers, a defining aspect of the study of any social phenomena is the desire to embrace the complexities of human and social experiences through the use of empirical tools that help to create a complex and holistic picture (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As part of the exploration of the community building process of the program “data” were also collected from varied sources, including 1) hundreds of pages of *student writing*, from journal assignments, essays, poems, books, and news articles; 2) a library of *student media* in the form of radio commentaries, videos, and plays; 3) four years of *policy documents, grant proposals, meeting minutes, and published and unpublished quarterly reports* co-written by SAC teachers, students, and partners; 4) 53 *informal interviews, and taped interviews* with SAC collaborators; and 5) 9 *published articles and book chapters* that focus on the activities of Students at the Center.

All of these were forms of data simultaneously were produced and discussed as a part of the work in institutional, community, and methodological contexts of the SAC program. Each suggested possibilities for other action research projects. In addition,

data collected through my own documentation process and research input became a tool to enhance the work of the other participants. When research questions and projects were formulated, we discussed options that were within the technical and material resources of Students at the Center and its community partners.

The key methodological concern of this process was “drawing upon creative combinations of written, oral and visual communication in the design, implementation and documentation of research” (Sohng, 1995, p. 14). In a practical sense it required that we all blend methods of inquiry (i.e. informal conversations, taped and transcribed semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and community partners; and detailed ethnographic accounts) with new forms of research validity applicable to this study, such as plausibility, credibility, relevance, and importance (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, 293).¹²

As a participant, the number of meetings, planning sessions, and classroom visits that I attended during the course of this study grew as SAC partners found ways to use me as a resource on various projects. This work took place in a range of contexts, from SAC classrooms and grassroots community meetings, to national education conferences and bureaucratic strategy sessions with the senior administrators of the New Orleans Public School System. An important part of this process was learning the ways that various parts of the Cycle of Action Research happen simultaneously and in multiple contexts.

¹² Sohng (1995) points out that validity in participatory research is not dependent on data interpretation that demonstrates a singular objective truth. Instead, she argues that valid knowledge must concern itself with both the knower and what is known, and be intersubjectively understood. To do this, *contextual validity* must address the extent to which research questions are properly framed and useful; *catalytic validity* should speak to the degree to which research offers possibilities for dialogue and organization that lead to social action; and *consequential validity* refers to the extent to which justice and public accountability are incorporated into research outcomes.

Step 4: Analyzing the Data with Collaborative Partners

In this study the investigation of community identified needs that explicitly address the many forms systemic race, class, and gender oppression that define the urban neighborhoods where the research was conducted (McLaren, 1992). During my work with Students at the Center, I did not conceive of the public school students, teachers, and community members that I partnered with as informants. Instead, I saw them as research collaborators that I met during their classroom and community settings. By positioning the study participants in this way, I departed from a methodology that seeks to have subjects “verify” conceptual theories that I alone constructed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In its place I used an action research method that collaborates with participants to generate the categories, properties, and theoretical constructs of the data (Glaser, 1978) to answer questions that they deem important.

One aspect of my participation with Students at the Center collaborators was in sharing methodologies for interpreting and using data with the community of learners engaged in community organizing, neighborhood planning, and activist-education projects. When asked for input or suggestions on projects, I gave it and discussed its utility for the task at hand with the other participants. At times, I was asked to support classroom work by helping students to design and implement community-based research projects of their choosing. In other instances I worked with New Orleans activists and citizen coalitions where SAC was a partner and helped to link the work of various neighborhood initiatives (operating at different “sub-levels” of community building) to the work of teachers and students in public schools.

Eventually, my academic documentation of the program as an extended case study put me in a position to help the other co-directors, teacher, students, and their partners think critically about their activities. In large part that work involved participating in the analysis and reporting on the results of their collaborative projects and using that information for grants written to expand the Students at the Center into additional school sites.

When I became an active participant in program activities and co-developed projects with students and teachers to help them make community linkages, my participant observation fieldwork that had been naturalistic, interpretative, and multi-modal, evolved into a PAR methodology. By extension, my original research questions, epistemological grounding, implementation plan, and data analysis techniques were also modified using collaborative and polyvocal methods. My researcher role changed as the work of Students at the Center was expanding. The program stretched from two school sites to ten during the course of this study. These changes also affected the founding director and required that a primary activity for SAC become formally documenting the program to help cultivate local support and build larger coalitions for school-community partnership that would diversify its grant funding.¹³

I worked on aspects of the program where others perceived my skills and perspective as an asset, but ultimately decisions made on what research avenues to pursue did not rest with me. Through this process I began to understand that a central task of this

¹³ From its inception, SAC has relied on entirely on grants and financial support from an array of partners to fund its classes. The majority of grant funds are dedicated to paying teacher salaries for elective courses that focus on an various writing-based curricula, with money included for supplies and guest artist fees for regular visits to classes working on specific projects. Over time, the program has grown due to additional grant awards and specialized emphases, such as the youth media, public health courses, community studies for specific neighborhoods, and after-school services that use Students at the Center models of education and community involvement.

study was highlighting the practices of empowerment that grew out of the pedagogy and collaborative model of Students at the Center.

Facilitating empowerment

Various dimensions and expressions of power are recurring themes in wide-ranging educational studies, including those focused on classroom politics, schooling institutions, ideology and curriculum, and societal power relations (Gore, 1995). This study of SAC tells the story of a community in struggle with both the macro and micro practices of power at work in their lives. The students, teachers, activists, artists, educators, and community partners that constitute the SAC program are bound together by their shared commitment to developing a mechanism to broaden the possibilities of democratic life. Conducting research in their institutional and community settings was one dimension of community education that engaged participants in reflection on what Foucault (1980) has referred to as the circulation of power:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I think of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself in their actions, and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives (p. 39).

As I worked with the Director to discuss methods for capturing the kind of data about the program that funders, education policy makers, and school system administrators were seeking, techniques for enhancing community partnership were a primary concern. For this reason classrooms, community organizations, university partnerships, artistic collaborations, and local coalitions that involve Students at the Center were the places for analyzing data in context. Given the nature of this investigation, not only the methodology of qualitative inquiry require participatory

approaches, but so too did the coding and categorizing of data. The analysis of the data from SAC classroom work and community initiatives was supplemented by program reports, photographs, videos, letters, interviews, and three years of “ethnographic notes” taken in classrooms, planning meetings, informal conversations, and public discussion with SAC partners.

Let me reiterate that I arrived at this method as a naturalistic response to the multifaceted nature of the SAC program and its philosophy. At the onset of this research, when my methods approximated traditional techniques of qualitative inquiry (i.e., constructing interview instruments, developing my own research protocol, working with code-retrieve computer-based data analysis programs, etc.), I saw triangulation as a way to validate findings from multiple sources (Denzin, 1978). As the research progressed I became aware of the critiques of a static triangulation offered by researchers of social phenomena who resist “the assumption that there is a fixed a point, or object that can be triangulated” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1999, p. 358). Rather than looking to triangulate for validity, Richardson (1998) argues:

I propose that the central image for ‘validity’ is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central image is a crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substance, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous.

The participants that I interviewed semi-formally were colleagues and also key agents of this research. Because participants were trained to generate and use research, primary source data came from our mutual investigation of community issues. In the cases where interviews were conducted, the aim was to use comparative and theoretical

knowledge in dialogue with participants to gain new understanding—of their work, its context, and its uses for action. The written product presented here is an example of a hybrid text, “that draws from the literary, artistic and scientific genres” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 307).

Step 5: Reporting and Acting on Results with Participants and Collaborators

As I have stressed, this account of Students at the Center work is based on communal and personal perspectives. The class assignments; community partnerships; neighborhood plans; and written, audio, and media projects use personal experience as a platform for social change, by situating them as practices to build power in a specific time and place. In many cases, I feel that the work produced by students speaks for itself, both as cultural products and social critiques levied through advocacy and community action. Students and community partners talk about the issue of empowerment in the same breath that they discuss learning to challenge the status quo. Many times these conversations involved discussion on ways to improve school practices to reflect the cultural and political realities of their lives.

To engage in this micro and macro analysis students were taught to look critically at their learning environments and social surroundings. When acting as researchers in collaboration with teachers and community members, young people were encouraged to problematize their circumstances and generate alternatives for action. As is the case with any method of teaching, not all students are willing to participate in the learning process institutionalized by schools (Everhart, 1979; McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1977). Many displayed a general resistance to their schooling by refusing to participate in discussion,

cutting class, or arriving each day without pen or paper. Rather than use these instances as evidence of school failure, teachers and students discussed the affect of apathy on community life. They also talked about ways to combat the alienation of African Americans, the poor and inner-city students and families in public schools. These topics often led to collaborative projects that involved students in developing alternatives and publicly sharing their ideas in educational and activist settings.

When SAC methods are used successfully, teachers incorporate contentious subjects into classroom discussion and frame the external structures governing schools as the domain of transformative action for their students. Addressing context and conflicting perspectives is particularly important to this aspect of Students at the Center and its goal of long-term community building.¹⁴ SAC participants and collaborators are often called upon to report on their work and discuss future actions for their partnerships. Creating the space to interact dialectically is a large part of Students at the Center and is essential for meaningful participation and authentic empowerment.

Problem-Solving and Collective Vision

During my first year of research, I was primarily a participant observer and much of my work revolved around documenting reflection sessions among SAC teachers and students. Though I spent a great deal of time in classrooms taking notes and asking questions about the activities that students and community partners were involved in, I was still learning about SAC and its philosophy. To do so, I immersed myself in as many

¹⁴ Kobena Mercer (1990) writes about these issues in “Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics” when describes all citizens as the product of plural realities and hybrid identities. For Mercer, this fact is not a barrier to social justice, rather it is the basis of freedom, democracy and critical citizenship that is the foundation of solidarity. He points out, “solidarity does not mean that everyone thinks the same way, it begins when people have the confidence to disagree over issues because they ‘care’ about to construct a common ground” (p. 68).

program activities as possible so I could better ask questions and have a fuller grasp of the conversations and activities that I witnessed. At the same time I read as much as I could about issues in urban education, collected material on the New Orleans Public School system, and attended community meetings open to educators, artists, and activists.

In my second year, I found myself in the role of participatory researcher working closely on various aspects of the program's community collaborations. By then I was considered a knowledgeable resource on the method and philosophy of community development and empowering education. Jim, the program's founder, asked me to become a regular presence in particular schools that requested assistance on strengthening the connections between teachers and community partners. In the fall of 2000 one of those sites was Marion Abramson High School in New Orleans East, a school where *Students at the Center* was just beginning that year. I gladly went and saw it as a new dimension in my research and participation in the SAC methodology.

Pedagogy of history and place

Abramson was added as a SAC site at the beginning of the 1999-2000 academic year with the enthusiastic support of the school principal and a new American history teacher on staff, Dan Konecky. At that time Dan, a musician in his mid-twenties and native of California, was a second-year veteran of Teach for America. He was open to trying different ways to interest his class in the mandated history curriculum and decided to add an activist slant to his class by using *Students at the Center* methods¹⁵.

¹⁵ A year and half after teaching his first SAC class Dan took on the role of the third SAC co-director and taught writing courses that focused on the culture and history. When asked why he was so attracted to this kind of teaching, Dan insists, "It's the best way to talk get students to talk about their own experience and motivate them. For me, it is also a great way to have a class where I can bring in team-teachers to deal with the themes like the forms of misrepresentation in the media and American military machine." In 2001 a book of student writings by his class on these two themes was published entitled *Rumors of War, Visions of Violence: Innocent versus Guilty*.

At Abramson nearly 10% of the students are Vietnamese, which represents the largest Asian population in a single district school in New Orleans. The New Orleans East area is known for its growing Vietnamese community, a trend that first became noticeable during a wave immigration following the fall of Saigon in 1975.

In spite of its visible presence in the New Orleans area, the Vietnamese community and the Vietnamese students at the school in “the East” remain isolated. Dan observes:

The school is really segregated. All of the Vietnamese kids are in the honors classes, and other classes have 99% black students. I’m in kind of a unique position because I teach one of the few subjects that gets a good racial mix in one class.

Using human agency to identify yourself

In 1999 Dan decided to use the theme of war for teaching students about history and the importance of being a critical and conscious consumer of information. To do it well, he also wanted to build his class around a community partnership. A few months before during summer break, I sat in on a meeting with the Director of the University of New Orleans Women’s Center and a Women’s Studies professor. I knew that they were scheduled to bring a Vietnamese author to the city to do a public reading as a part of their Life Writing series for the year. At the same Kathy Randels, a theater artist who often worked with SAC, also formed a partnership with the Women’s Center. She got funding from the Louisiana State Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts to support the creation and execution of a play she conceived of in 1989, while still a

student at Northwestern University. The play would eventually become *Rumours of War*¹⁶.

When I met with Dan we talked about the importance of incorporating the school's diversity into class curricula and discussion. He described his interest in finding innovative material and pedagogy as way to facilitate self-expression and community dialogue in this way:

My students ask, 'Why are we learning Black history and not Vietnamese history?' The half answer I give is that we are going chronologically through the American history curriculum, but I know that's an excuse. There is nothing in the public school guidelines that includes Vietnamese history or culture. It might not be in the state standards, but it's where they live, and I have to find a way include it. These kids need all the perspectives they can get, especially because they can learn a lot from each other right here in the school. I have been using a lot of photocopied sources rather than just teaching from the textbook. The texts they give us to work with just aren't enough. They're pretty thin to begin with, but when I'm trying to work in other cultural points of view they are pathetic (D. Konecky, personal interview, March 2000).

Following that discussion, a collaborative project was created. Kathy began working with SAC students at McDonogh 35 and Abramson to collect source material for her production. When working with Kathy, Dan's Vietnamese students interviewed family members who lived through the war, and African American students interviewed relatives that served in the military during Vietnam, WWII, the Korean War, and the Gulf Wars. Collectively, students began developing an oral history project based on collecting community memories from war veterans and survivors.

¹⁶ The play was staged as a three-part production that opened at the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center in October of 2001. Videotaped interviews that were conducted as part of an SAC collaboration for an oral history project were incorporated into the performance. Six videos were displayed in the lobby through the use of a video installation accompanied by student writings and books at each performance. Before and after the stage play, the documentaries ran and featured a specific perspective on war from Vietnam veterans, war refugees, civil rights workers, women, pacifists, and family members of veterans.

Defining your reality

Jeff Moebus, a New Orleans resident who served 22 years in U.S. army before retiring in 1998, was also invited to the class to talk about his work with an organization called Vietnam Veterans Against Another Vietnam. At the end of the semester, the Women's Center brought Le Ly Hayslip, author of *When Heaven & Earth Changed Places*, to speak with students from Abramson about her book. Susan Bryson explains her desire to collaborate with SAC in this way:

My interest is in preventing violence against women. I don't usually work with young people; I'm not a teacher or trained as an educator. But it seems that SAC was doing a lot of anti-violence work, not directly perhaps, but in many ways. So I called Jim and asked him for support on our Life Writing project. When I bring people from other places in to speak I want them to do something in the community in addition to giving a lecture on campus. So I had the idea that the visiting writers could meet with high school students and give them a writing workshop. It was a perfect fit with the SAC program because of the intensive writing that the students do.

As a part of the Life Writing Series at the University of New Orleans, Ms. Hayslip talked about the importance of memoir and collective memory that writing captures. When she arrived at Abramson High School she talked to the students about what it was like for her as a twelve-year-old girl when U.S. helicopters landed in her village of Ky La. The day that she came to speak the classroom was crowded with chairs to seat up to fifty people, including students from other classes and the school's Asian Club. Dan's class chatted excitedly about getting to meet the author and ask her questions about what it was like to live through a war. They also wanted to know why she decided to write about such personal traumas, like being raped, tortured, and leaving her family

behind when she fled for her life. As some students flipped through the dog-eared pages in their copies of her book, others looked over their well-rehearsed questions.

The anticipation in the room grew as other classes filed in and took vacant seats. Members of the school staff and teachers joined the group and stood around the perimeter of the room. A few students in Dan's class fussed over the position of the tripod and the angle of the camera it supported. They were preparing to videotape the event, just as they had done with the interviews that were part of their oral history project. When other students and teachers were observing their media work, the three-person video crew was anxious to get everything just right.

Naming your history

As Jeff and Ms. Hayslip were escorted into the room, the crowd fell into an expectant hush. Marion, an African American junior in Dan's class introduced the guests with a two- age opening she had written for the occasion. Ms. Hayslip opened her remarks by saying,

I have been living in San Diego for more than twenty-five years, but I am still reminded that Americans and Vietnamese people see the war that I lived through very different. In my native country, people call it the American War in Vietnam, and here people call it the Vietnam War. It all depends on where you are and where you come from. It's important to remember that to learn about the war you can't just read one book or see one movie, you need to hear many sides. Try to make sure that you don't judge anybody or take sides. We must honor and respect other points of view. That's what we call freedom.... Remember, whatever you do, do it with two purposes—compassion and the common good. If not, we will all destroy ourselves and our community.

She spent the next thirty minutes talking about how she survived the tragedy of war as a child and her adult journey to deal with her pain through writing. Afterwards, Jeff talked about how his perspective on war changed after serving in Vietnam. Students

peppered him with questions about the number of people he killed and the things that he saw on the front lines in the jungle. They wanted to know if, after a career of military service, would he ever choose to go back into a war. Instead of dwelling on the gory aspects of his time in Vietnam, he reflected on his experiences and later included an essay in the book that the class published:

I'd bought the lies I had been told. I thought I was going there to win peace and democracy with the Vietnamese people. But it was an abomination. I learned that after two months there, it didn't take me 30 years to understand how horrible war is.... I lost part of my soul when I was in Vietnam, and I am now given the opportunity to get it back. It isn't often a man gets a chance to be on the right side of something about which he was dead wrong thirty-six years ago. It isn't often that one is in a position to impact the hearts and minds of young people who can be diverted from the War Mind, the War Machine, and War Culture.¹⁷

Transforming your life world

When the discussion ended and the audience dispersed, one of the students in Dan's class lingered in the back of room. It was Cantrelle, a smooth-faced sixteen-year-old junior that stood a full head taller than me. He spoke softly from behind his glasses and looked directly into my eyes. I knew Cantrelle better than a lot of the other students because he was enrolled in two SAC classes at Abramson, a Sociology course and Dan's history class. Pat Bryant, a founding member of a local coalition of activist organizations called Community Labor United (CLU) and a longtime community organizer, partnered with Students at the Center to offer Sociology at Abramson. He worked with Jeff for

¹⁷ In his essay, "A Place Called..." which appears in *Rumors of War, Visions of Violence* Jeff Moebus connects his experiences in Vietnam with his work in Chiapas in support of the Zapatistas. After visiting Chiapas twice, he reflects on the impact that NAFTA and American policies have on indigenous people in Chiapas, Colombia, and other Latin American countries. He refers to all of these as areas places of "Made in the USA Militarization" and talks about the importance of educating youth on these issues.

some time in CLU but could not attend the talk. Instead he asked Cantrelle to report on he heard to the first period Sociology class the next day.

When I asked Cantrelle what he thought of Ms. Hayslip's talk, he talked about SAC and its impact on his learning process:

I used to go to McDonogh 35, but it's weird, I have a higher motivation to learn here at Abramson. Maybe it's because everybody there is smart but it's different at Abe. Here I get teased here because I'm a pretty good student, and when I tell people I like history and want to be a politician, they laugh. At McDonogh 35, teachers like Mr. Bryant and Mr. Konecky would be loved by the students, but here some of the student's complain about doing the work. But, you know, I feel like I get it and I can make the connection, even if other students don't. I mean, Mr. Bryant told me things I never knew before—like about Reconstruction and work on slave plantations, and then we talked about imprisonment and selling drugs. Now I see it's sort of a trap to cage black people up again, but we never really hear it talked about that way on TV. It all reminds of when my dad used to tell me that if you want something in paper bag, you gotta put it in there for yourself. It's like that with school, I guess. I see that now.

Developing collective empowerment to contest injustice

Though Pat's past experience teaching was at the college level, after working with the Students at the Center program on neighborhood issues, he wanted to extend the activist partnership into public school classrooms. After talking it over with Jim, SAC offered its first Sociology class and built a curricula around the struggle for civil and human rights.¹⁸ When asked about his own learning process in teaching a high school elective course, Pat points out the challenges that face teachers each day:

¹⁸ The course was called Youth Social Movements in Twentieth Century and Contemporary American History, and used a packet of readings, a course text, and films like *Freedom Song* and *Eyes on the Prize*. Pat asked a group of community members to visit the class as team teachers, including a local union organizer, a civil rights activist, a female minister, the Dean of the Social Sciences at a Dillard University, and me. The course was to designed to blend at sociological theory, participatory research methods, and the possibilities for youth organizing in New Orleans.

I've never taught in high schools or elementary schools but I've organized a number of community education programs with youth groups. Those are nontraditional operations, and SAC seems similar to those situations. In those situations, we educated young people by identifying the problems in their communities and developing short-and long-range plans to solve them. That involved traveling and research. And SAC follows pretty closely to those same principles. In the community work, you deal with people who want to be there; in the public schools you deal with everybody who comes, everybody who *has* to be there. In public schools, you can't do as much; you don't have the passion from the students. It's a different construct when you have people who come voluntarily.

Building networks

Public urban schools do not have the luxury of waiting for students to choose them. Yet, students, teachers, and community members can look to everyday life for sources of inspiration and relevance as they design curriculum. Students at the Center does it by digging into neighborhood history, family memories, and everyday life. Pat talks about how his relationship with SAC began when community members were looking for ways to partner with public schools:

Several CLU members were trying to organize some resistance to the LEAP 21 test and Jim came to one of our forums. Then he came back the next time, and he brought students. When several young people participated in the roundtable discussion on testing, their participation gave a different edge to the meetings. They brought points of view to the CLU that community groups wouldn't encounter in their everyday affairs. One member of Fred Hampton's group and the SAC challenged the CLU leaders on their political involvement and their system of doing things. But that was a breath of fresh air for the CLU leaders. So in this regard, in teaching young people to speak out, SAC has been effective.

Validating new methods of learning

Pat often says that the kind of learning SAC provides should be happening throughout the public education system. Currently he is working with Urban Strategies, LLC, a company focused on developing environmental, public health, and sanitation

projects that intersect with public policy and community organizing.¹⁹ His collaboration with SAC continues through a planned series of teacher workshops and classroom presentations to help students integrate interdisciplinary projects into their work. The aim is to establish community organizing, recycling activities that are led by students and teachers as part of science, social studies, language arts, mathematics, and health courses.²⁰

Months before becoming a regular presence at Abramson, I worked with another SAC class at Douglass High School where students were collecting data and exchanging ideas on developing a school reform plan. Like other courses in the program, this class and their teacher were using media, building critical thinking skills, and crafting action plans. The class focused on photography and writing and began by having students react to photographs and build stories around the images that they discussed collectively. The idea was to engage students by asking them to consider the way photos can be used to help convey meaning and enhance written language.

The class was held in the same room used for Keyboarding & Typing and students sat in the third floor room each day huddled at desks with keyboards and outmoded PCs. The chairs formed a U-shape facing a wall of windows that brought the elements into the class. Some days the eastern sun filled the room with New Orleans tropical weather, but during the colder months the poorly insulated windows could not

¹⁹ Urban Strategies works in collaboration with BFI Waste Services, the Sanitation Department of the City of New Orleans, Parent Advocates of New Orleans Public Schools, and the United Teachers of New Orleans. In the future, internships will be offered to students who are interested in spending a year studying environmental justice, and policy as part of their classroom learning.

²⁰ The New Orleans teachers' union is negotiating with the school system to have a certified teacher named to coordinate the internship activities and develop curricula in the fall of 2002. The teacher-coordinator will also be responsible for incorporating recycling and urban environmentalism into cross-disciplinary studies at selected school sites.

withstand the wind blustering off the Mississippi River and moving eastward toward the old school building just across the canal.

One day in October when I visited, the window unit was broken and students came in and sat down with jackets stretched over their hands. The following is an excerpt of that class discussion, after students talked about the need for physical improvements to their school:

Lisa: I think the big issue is getting parents involved.

Mrs. V: It's big issue, I agree but how would you do it?

Lisa: I don't know because of a lot of parents don't know the situation in schools. Most of them just see it on the news, but that's it.

Mrs. V: That assumes information alone is the key. Write down what the problems are as you see it, and think about the things that you think parents should be aware of. Eventually, each of you will present your plans to Mr. Nzinga [the principal] because he should be informed and aware of everything that goes in the school. We have been talking about photographs quite a bit, are there ways that you could include photos with your school reform plans?

Lisa: We should take pictures of graffiti on the walls. If we had a camera we could catch people vandalizing.

Quarence: My issue is parents too.

Mrs. V: Okay, that's a good place to start, but it's not a plan. You need to tell me why parents need to be more involved with the school, and then tell me how we should get parents here.

Belledra: We should send out information and make phone calls.

Mrs. V: True, that's what we have been doing.

Nora: We should write something about our school and put it in the paper.

Mrs. V: That's an idea, write all of these possibilities down. Remember this is an ongoing project and it's not about doing one or two assignments. Two to three times a week you need to talk with the rest of the class about what you're doing.

And you should work together, like Quarence and Lisa, if you have a common issue.

Harry: I think we need video cameras around here.

Quarence: And parents could give money for it, and we could do fundraisers.

Mrs. V: You need to be more specific if you are proposing a fundraiser. Think about manpower and funds. Will it cost money up front?

Lisa: What about businesses, don't we have business friend? At my old school we had Circle Food Store.

Mrs. V: Freeport-McMoRan is ours. They have already given a lot of money to the school.²¹

Lisa: Where? What are they doing with all that money if we still have broken windows, bathrooms that don't work, and classes without floors?

Mrs. V: Well, I guess those decisions about how to spend the funds are up to the administration.

Mrs. V: Cantrella, what do you think?

Cantrella: I am with them on video cameras and parents. It could make a dramatic difference. People do things around here because they know they won't get caught, like setting fires every other day.

Johana: Several issues concern me, but I think we should write letters to the School Board and let them know what's going on.

Lisa: They already know!

Quarence: If they see students, not just teachers, that are concerned about the school then they'll do something.

Mrs. V: Should this be just SAC students or the whole school?

Harry: It definitely should be everybody. We are all here everyday, no matter what class you take.

²¹ Freeport McMoRan is the only Fortune 500 Company that is presently headquartered in New Orleans. Since the corporation was formed in 1981 from a merging of McMoRan Oil and Freeport Minerals, it has come under increasing attack from environmental and human rights groups around the world. The company has repeatedly been accused of human rights violations in Indonesia and the atrocities in Southeast Asia. After years of resolutely ignoring the environmental effects of mining and development, the EPA named it the top air, land, and water polluter.

Mrs. V: Okay, then you need to think about which means are more effective, individual letters, or a petition.

Lisa: I don't think they will read all those letters. But they love TV. Have you seen the School Board commercials? I thought they were kind of racial, plus those were probably \$1 million dollar ads. How can the School Board have money for that and not have money for boiler heat and books?

Mrs. V: Good question. You should come and ask Col. Davis that at the next School Board meeting.

Johanna: My question is about tourism money, isn't some of it supposed to go the school system? They talk about us not being able to pass a test, but it's them misusing the money. They won't even give ya'll a raise or nothing.

Lessons on Building Community

Three days after that discussion, the *Times Picayune* ran an article entitled, "Curriculum To Be Tailored to the LEAP Test, But It's Too Late, Critics Say" (*Times Picayune*, February 5, 2000). The story announced that for the first time system-wide standardized coursework was being developed to align curricula with standards that were imposed by the state three years earlier. When the article ran, students were already scheduled to take the state exam in six weeks. Activist groups around the city were outraged by the announcement and a complimentary media campaign to gain public support for the new curriculum being put in place by the school district. Though parent groups supported higher academic standards for their children they vehemently protested the poor preparation that students were given to meet the state requirements.

A glaring omission from the commercials that were mentioned in class discussion was the fact that the school system was literally years behind in developing the curricula that would be used for the test. Nonetheless, students who failed the LEAP would be held

back and retested until they passed. As parent Sharon Cooper said at the next School Board meeting:

Our kids are failing because their minds have not been trained. If they had been given advanced learning all along, we wouldn't be having this problem.

In answer to the demands raised by Ms. Cooper and community group Parents for Educational Justice,²² Board members offered focus group discussions and a possible meeting with the City Council and Mayor Morial. For teachers, the only follow-up was the imposition of more regulations and higher consequences for those that deviate from the curriculum. School system officials announced to reporters that “academic audits” would be instituted to make sure the teachers followed the new curriculum, and as part of the CEO Davis’ plan, “schools, programs and department that don’t show results may be reorganized by replacing or reassigning staff” (*Times Picayune, February 5, 2000*).

The examples presented here are but two of many and illustrate the use of agency and collective empowerment for community building. Both show the importance of context and the application of dialectic pedagogies. With very different approaches, teachers and students looked at the issues in their neighborhoods and community to make learning relevant to student experience. Both also used education as a springboard for participatory research, where the students began by articulating problems and dialogue became a form of critical reflection that led to action.

Students demonstrated their empowerment as they developed concrete plans of action. The social issues and daily problems that were under study were not neatly solved

²² Parents for Educational Justice formed as a spin-off of the CLU forums on the LEAP 21. After a series of meetings, a group of citizens decided to further their activism and organizing around the issue of public education in New Orleans. The group continues its work and its members have worked with SAC students on various community projects.

in the conversations or the community partnerships. As the conversations deepened, collaborators were led to more questions about the problems that they faced in their everyday lives. Thus, the generation of knowledge was directly linked to ways that the group could utilize the information to implement a practical idea (Sohng, 1995).

When public education reforms follow the same path that disenfranchises poor communities of color, new tactics for community engagement and institutional cooperation are required. Under these conditions, collaboration among teachers, students, and community groups can be an effective strategy for practical and philosophical reasons. The dilemma faced by Students at the Center and its partners is how to build a power base that can facilitate new alliances and enable participatory activities for change in its institutional, community, and school contexts.

CHAPTER 4

Producing New Knowledge: Contesting Injustice and Redefining Accountability

As embodied in educational reform, the social reconstruction of the city is a special kind of policy.... Educational improvement thus poses the question of what are the conditions under which a diverse set of players, governmental and nongovernmental, can be brought together around the aim of a social good (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 35).

It has been my argument that public schools are important socio-cultural entities because they are longstanding public institutions that acculturate young people into the society that they are being prepared to join. Current policies designed to restructure urban schools at the federal and state level decry the academic achievement of inner city youth, but rarely address the social and economic realities of the urban communities in which they live. This grievous omission often results in a reform agenda for urban education that reflects a corporate model of schooling based on the assumption that uniform curricula, rigid criteria for efficiency, and quality control audits are a means to improve classroom teaching and learning.

With these objectives, education reform efforts pay scant attention to the social and economic disparities that are reinforced by the exclusionary politics of public education policymaking. Thus, efficiency and quantifiable achievement on standardized tests have become yardsticks for measuring school management and academic success, while equity and personal development are goals that receive little attention in system-wide school improvement plans. Even when reformers acknowledge the challenges of

bureaucratic structures within school districts, systemic reforms rarely if ever begin with a sociocultural valuing of student experience (Anyon, 1997).

Unfortunately, teaching practices built on community engagement are implicitly discouraged by standardized curricula. When acceptable domains of knowledge are narrowly defined, teachers are forced to “teach to the test” first and foremost. Curricula that fall outside of that arena are abandoned when pedagogies based on the needs of teachers, students, and community life directly oppose unilateral policies defined by the state. Aligning student work and domains of learning to the state standards becomes a matter of job security for teachers. But without a means to incorporate reflection and action into teaching and learning styles, district schools will be forever tethered to reform initiatives that do not stretch beyond site-based management programs and pre-fabricated course materials.

James Comer (1993) argues that these structures can breed a defeatist attitude in educators who see themselves not as professionals, but survivors in schools in the grip of “the hand of hopelessness” (p. iii). That widespread viewpoint can discourage educators from pursuing bold initiatives. Their confidence may be undermined that new practices can make a difference, and they may be inclined to “circle the wagons” to deflect blame and avoid further criticism (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 45). Through my prolonged interaction with SAC students, teachers, and community partners in their school and neighborhood settings, I witnessed their struggles with systemic inequities that they encountered each day. In spite of the barriers, they found ways to build collective agency with school and community partnerships. Through these partnerships, they came to believe that collaboration was the only route to creating alternative visions for the future.

In this chapter I describe the knowledge produced by students and community coalitions to create a new discourse on school accountability. By using dialogue as a means to problem-solving on contemporary social issues and historical injustices, SAC has used its collaborative process to form networks of activists and school reformers. In this definition of accountability, students contribute to the improvement of their schools and communities as they express themselves and their ideas for social change in writing and various forms of media. While students begin to think of themselves as an important voice on urban issues, the community at large begins to organize and work with students and teachers to create “healthy neighborhoods” (Fullilove, 1996).

The pages that follow present examples of students, educators, and activists working together as empowered citizens to improve their community. In telling this story, I will address a question posed by Chris D’Amour, a SAC business partner and financial supporter the program, who asked, “How can Students at the Center do what the New Orleans Public School system can’t?” Chris, an attorney with Adams & Reese Law Firm, knows the program well. During a conversation about the coming academic year, he talked about the firm’s plans to fund Students at the Center courses in support of their adopted education partner, Andrew Bell Middle School.

Bell Middle is a Title I Learning Academy that receives additional federal funding due the economic status of its students. At Bell, 85% of the student body receive free or reduced lunch. It also has the unfortunate reputation for having many of the students who failed the LEAP 21 exam during the eighth grade.¹ Bell is a feeder school to another SAC site, John McDonogh High School, and both are situated in midtown New Orleans, one

¹ Though many of these students are physically advanced to high schools because of their age, this population of young people is labeled “8.5 students” until they pass the state test and can be officially promoted to the ninth grade. District middle and high schools in New Orleans both have 8.5 students.

of city's most economically and culturally diverse areas. Though the midtown area has the largest Latin-American population in the city, the district schools like Bell remain 99.7% African American. The school was labeled among those "academically unacceptable" by the state, along with its high school neighbor John McDonogh.

Chris pondered this issue of SAC's success out loud during a lunch meeting in the summer of 2000. School was out, and Jim and I were sitting with Chris in a popular Italian restaurant in Uptown New Orleans. The three of us were gathered for a strategy session to prepare for a meeting with the school system CEO in the next few weeks. Though all of us had met Col. Davis informally, no one had been able to reach him over the past month. Because of his inaccessibility, SAC was in a jam with its major funder, who wanted to see evidence that the New Orleans Public School System was behind the work of Students at the Center. Jim had called, emailed, and faxed Davis and his support staff about the renewal of the original \$300,000 grant award from a local foundation.² He sent the most recent student books, copies of the teen newspaper, and media pieces produced by SAC classes. After weeks with no reply, Jim reluctantly agreed to have one of the partners at Chris' firm, a good friend of Col. Davis and member of the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation, set up the meeting.

We all had seen the program's successes and recognized the challenges it faced. Overall Students at the Center was leaving an impression on the community it served and helping to mobilize neighborhood groups around issues of education and community building. As the conversation progressed the three of us talked about the original purpose

² This foundation, which prefers to go unnamed, funds its programs for up to three years. Because of the impressive work that SAC students have produced, the foundation agreed to extend the funding for an additional three-year cycle. Funds would only be dispersed to the district Central Office, and transferred into SAC accounts, under the condition that the school system showed interest in continuing the program beyond the life of the grant.

of the program, the problems it is designed to address, and the mechanics of Students at the Center classes. We also talked about the political strategy of getting Col. Davis to sit down with us and how we could best present an overview of SAC if the CEO only granted us fifteen minutes of his time.

On the day of meeting the Jim, Chris, and I drove across the river together. Though it was 97 degrees, we donned business attire and prepared to win Davis over. As we waited in a conference room, we reviewed our plan of handing him copies of funded proposals, SAC publications, and a mock letter of agreement that we could send back to the funding agency right away. We tried to relax in our comfortable swiveling chairs and did not talk about the short window of time that was left to set up the program's infrastructure for the school year ahead. No one had a Plan B if Davis refused to send a letter of support.

When he finally entered the room, he sat down quickly and allowed us to introduce ourselves. He commented that he knew about the program and was happy with the good work it was doing in Orleans public schools. Minutes into meeting he said that the school system was not in a position to give SAC funding, but he wanted to use the Students at the Center model to help him meet his ten-point improvement plan for the school district. As he talked about the academic outcomes he was seeking, he called in his right hand person Ollie Tyler, Chief Academic Officer of the school system. Ms. Tyler, he assured us, would make sure that our work was in line with the academic benchmarks mandated by the state and would shepherd our correspondence directly to him from that point forward. Forty minutes later he left, shaking our hands and vowing to sign a letter if we left it behind. Before he dashed out, Col. Davis mentioned that he also

wanted to use SAC student media to shore up the video and cable access channel of the school system. We agreed that the first step would be having SAC students interview Col. Davis.

Before that meeting, when Chris first asked about the differences between SAC and the school system, I did not have a cogent answer for his query. Nor did I give him a succinct response to the follow up question, “Why doesn’t New Orleans Public Schools do what works for Students at the Center?” Now I understand that the first step to addressing those issues is not to assume that Students at the Center, as an education project, and the school district, as a systemic structure, are in fact trying committed to the same ideals (Freire, 1970).

For social scientists and urban scholars studying education, “reform” must be examined in the context of the “inter-group maneuvering and symbolic politics that hinder or facilitate collective action around a reform agenda” (Stone, 2001). Because the Students at the Center program embodies participatory action method, its network of students and teachers use their agency to empower themselves and improve schools from within by acting collectively. To be effective, they must believe that their work holds the possibility for community building and take steps to act on their own behalf, to collaboratively interrupt the external structures that shape their education and environment ³.

³ Miron (1996) argues that educational agendas that are crafted at the federal level often use language like “community-based education strategy” but stop at the level of rhetoric. These slogans are often used as rhetoric and are not supported by efforts to give voice to local communities in the adoption of their state education goals. Instead, the language of community empowerment is used, particularly in economically distressed inner-cities, to create the illusion of, “a populist crusade to make America’s schools better” (see Miron, 1996, p. 91-99).

Contesting Injustice: Maximizing Community Assets

Envisioning urban education reform as a product of place-making, culture, and history is not a part of the mainstream discourse. Though schools are often referred to as “open systems”⁴ because of their sensitivity to local revenue streams, school-community interface, bureaucratic politics, district boundaries, and attendance zones, they remain deeply stratified institutions (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 36). In most school systems, this “openness” does not increase the power of citizens to influence school practices, but instead diffuses it in the throng of interest groups pushing for a space at the table with education policymakers.⁵ System-wide school interventions leave precious little space for individual communities to define the most effective relationship between a neighborhood and its schools. In Orleans Parish the confluence of racial and economic factors⁶ make resident participation with the school system and its education policies particularly vulnerable to a small but influential business community.

⁴ The term *open system* is borrowed from organizational theory and refers to the mix of political activities and processes that influence the character of schools as public organizations (see Paul Peterson, 1976 *School Politics Chicago Style*).

⁵ As Clarence Stone (2001) points out, the dimensions of education politics that could be included in this equation include “the politics of the board of education; the politics of the superintendent’s office; the intergovernmental links between the local school system and the education programs and mandates at the state and federal levels; the locally minded moves of governors and other state officials; the local links between the school district and city hall; the politics of the PTA and other community groups as they interact with school officials; collective bargaining by the teachers’ union and other employee organizations; and the watchdog activities of taxpayer groups” (p. 36).

⁶ Census data for 2000 reports that Orleans Parish has an African American population of 67.3%, a homeownership rate of 46.5%, and 40% of the city’s children living in poverty. These statistics show concentrations that greatly exceed state averages, where the African American population is 32.5%, the homeownership rate is 67.9%, and number of children living in poverty is 26% of the Louisiana population. Relative to national socio-demographic data, where African American population is reported at 12.3%, the homeownership rate at 66.2%, and the number of children living in poverty is 19.9%, conditions in Orleans Parish show pervasive structural inequality.

When collaborative structures are imposed by top-down coalitions, they are not deeply linked to the culture of specific schools and their neighborhoods and often reflect a political agenda that is in opposition to community interests and values. At the national level, this means that as populations increasingly relocate outside of the central cities, the political power base of the states like Louisiana also resides in the suburbs. In terms of education policy, this movement has cultural and financial implications that constrict urban school reform efforts. As large numbers of middle class students have moved out of city, the high achievers still living in urban areas are encouraged to seek out the district's magnet schools. For those that have not yet gained access to magnet and citywide access schools, voucher programs increasingly encouraged a systemic solution. As a result, political pressure to improve district schools must be mounted in a terrain where participation in a shared effort does not come easily.⁷

Though reform initiatives often focus on macro-level policies, Students at the Center takes a markedly different approach, one that I argue is more effective than district-wide reforms. The initiatives put in place by state governing bodies and city regimes are suffused with political maneuvers that reach far beyond the activities directly related to formal school organizations (Henig, Hula, Orr and Pedescleaux, 1999; Stone, 2001, 1999; Wong, 1991). In New Orleans, the stratification of the larger society is not only reflected by public education pedagogy and ideology, but is also magnified by political and social priorities set by education gatekeepers.

⁷ In an eleven-city study published in *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (Stone, et al., 2001) researchers found that the key stumbling block to education reform was the differing of opinions about what precisely constituted "the education problem." Community elites across the board felt that improving education was an important goal, but their ideas about how to bring about this end were different from the those of educational professionals, education activists, and community influentials.

According to those who argue that equitable education can only be achieved as a part of the social reconstruction of cities:

Education especially is a matter of great concern at all levels of government, and across several sectors of society. Among other considerations, many actors now see the economic vitality of the city is irrevocably tied to the social conditions, and social conditions, in turn, are closely linked to education and related matters of youth development. School reform has thus emerged as a major policy initiative among those concerned with the revitalization of the city (Stone, 2001, p. 35).

For cities with declining tax bases, there is an unavoidable dependence on state funds and business interests as key sources of revenue for education (Weir, 1996). Given the morass of macro-political structures that shape education, the opportunity for civic mobilization efforts is dependent on a local community's ability forge alliances that revamp existing relationships (Henig, 1995). If community-based coalitions are to be effective players in addressing issues overlooked by disjointed educational policy, they must work with elites and power-brokers to develop a shared understanding of the problems they face. A key to this process is the capacity to act collaboratively with the existing resources available.

Being at the Table with Decision Makers

In March 1998, a group of business leaders came together and created a nonprofit organization, the Greater New Orleans Education Foundation (GNOEF). This effort was the first of its kind in the metropolitan area and was intended to be a research-based, independent, non-profit that was formed "in response to the community's outcry for education reform" (GNOEF website, 1999). Though the Board of Directors includes the

Mayor, the president of the United Teachers Union of New Orleans, and the Orleans Parish School Board President, it remains heavily influenced by business interests.⁸

GNOEF has two major committees, its Policy Board, an entity comprised of eight university presidents in New Orleans, and the Education Council, a 48-member coalition of school board members, teachers, community group representatives, scholars of education, philanthropists, faith-based leaders, and politicians. The mix of members were chosen in an effort to “help represent community concerns” (GNOEF website, 1999). Of its 48 seats, the Education Council dedicates two spots to citywide parent representatives, two to secondary school students, two to principals, two to teachers, and one to a tenants’ association representative. The stated purpose of this body is three fold: 1) to review best practice research; 2) to develop standards in each best practice area; and 3) to develop, review, and approve the principles that are a part of the Foundation’s Declaration of Intent to Reform in collaboration with the School Board.

A five-year strategic plan for reform proposed by GNOEF was made public in June of 1999 and outlined areas which committees were formed to “re-engineer.” The best practices that serve as the foundation for much of the strategic plan were researched and identified by a GNOEF consultant who was to work closely with educators identified as expert superintendents, from Houston, Chicago, and Long Beach public school systems. The Education Foundation publicly touts its process as collaborative and participatory by enumerating the numbers of groups represented. Yet the mission statement that this body produced demonstrated the heavy influence of business executives:

⁸ Of the 14-member Board there are two corporate vice presidents, one bank president, the president of Bell South Louisiana, and one representative of a major law firm who also sits on the state Board of Education.

The New Orleans Public School System, with the support of the entire community, commits to ensuring that every child in every grade of every public school will achieve the maximum potential of her/his ability. Children come first. They must be educated to graduate with mastery of essential subjects and be technologically proficient to compete as productive citizens in the challenging 21st century.

The Education Foundation representatives have vehemently criticized the existing bureaucracy that controls the financial and material resources of the New Orleans school system. But their proposal creates another top-down structure, alleged to reduce fragmentation of the district's resources.

Yet since the organization was founded, media reports have shown that cohesion and clarity of purpose is not the hallmark of GNOEF and its relationship to the New Orleans School Board. From its inception the Education Foundation has been able to wield significant political power that has influenced the district's policies and personnel decisions. After the previous Superintendent resigned in July 1998, it took five months for the School Board to identify three finalists to replace him. Less than a month after the finalists were named, the GNOEF and a consortium of faith-based leaders publicly voiced disapproval for the nominees and demanded that the School Board re-open its search.

In response, six months and three interim superintendents later, the search was narrowed to the final two applicants. But as they were preparing for their first public interviews, George McKenna, a California educator and New Orleans native, abruptly withdrew from the race for the newly titled position of Chief Executive Officer for the school system. McKenna submitted a brief statement to the School Board and walked away from the race just after meeting business leaders and the Mayor. In his public

statement to the press he said, “numerous and varied political considerations that motivated the superintendent search do not show a community that wants to give up its old political corruption and wheeling dealing”⁹ (*Times Picayune*, May 25, 1999).

Local politics are not the only force with a heavy hand in public education for Orleans Parish. The other is the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, or the BESE Board that governs all of the school systems in the state. It was established in 1973 and became the state policy-making body and the governing Board for vocation and technical education and charter schools. This powerful group is composed of eleven members, one from each of its eight state districts and three at-large members appointed by the governor. In New Orleans, the BESE Board is most famous for its role in crafting the statewide-standardized test and the state report card for public schools.

The LEAP 21, or the Louisiana Education Assessment Program for the 21st Century, is given to all public school students at grades 4 and 8, along with the Graduate Exit Exam given at grades 10 and 11. These tests have been the source of much public dissension from irate parents, community leaders, and educators since it became a matter of policy to hold back students who fail the test. After New Orleans administrators estimated that two-thirds of the city’s 13,000 eligible students would initially fail the math and or English portions of the test, the New Orleans City Council and Orleans Parish School Board took a symbolic stance against the LEAP in March of 2000, saying that students have not been adequately prepared for the exam.¹⁰

⁹ McKenna’s public statements warranted a media debate and an immediate rebuttal by Mayor Morial on a radio station airing a “Sunday Journal” show dedicated to the Superintendent race. Later, Dwight McKenna, a former New Orleans School Board and brother to the would-be CEO, defended his resignation and told a *Times Picayune* reporter that the community was not ready to change its political power base.

¹⁰ The Orleans Parish School Board called for the state to abandon plans to hold back students who failed the LEAP test. In resolution that passed 4-3 on February 27, 2000, the Board said that the exam should not be the main criteria for promotion. Members of the BESE Board and the GNOEF publicly voiced

The public was less than impressed with this political statement. It is well known that the Education Foundation, which also supports the student assessment and curriculum standards outlined by the state, financially supported the campaign of some School Board members. In late February 2000, a Students at the Center class dedicated to writing for radio sparked a discussion on the LEAP test. The class was sharing their ideas for radio commentaries that were to be aired on the community radio station through collaboration with guest writer and media specialist Kalamu ya Salaam. The following is excerpt from the class discussion that ensued after Kalamu asked the class to define the purpose of school:

Adriane: It's not to be prepared for a test, it's to be educated on everything. A test won't make me a holistic person.

Keon: But LEAP is here to stay. A 4.0 in New Orleans is like a 2.5 in Ohio, at least that's what my dad says. I know from my sisters, they went to college and they needed remedial courses. The New Orleans Public School system isn't giving us everything we need for college.

Kalamu: No one wants to be stupid. The assumption underneath all these tests is that students who fail don't want to learn.

Towanna: But how can they raise the standard of the LEAP without raising the standards of the school system?

Kalamu: The LEAP was not introduced by educators, it was introduced by legislators. Then the public school system is required to enact the law before a system was put in place to teach the material.

Collins: I am thinking about writing my radio commentary on the LEAP, but I guess people are tired of hearing about it by now.

Kalamu: For the people outside of New Orleans public schools, it's still a new topic. Some are just becoming aware of it. And remember, the public is not hearing about issue from people your age.

disappointment in this action, calling the argument invalid. Co-chairman of the Education Foundation also told the *Times Picayune*, "I don't think the state is going to be particularly receptive to any suggestions from the New Orleans public school system" (March 1, 2000).

By discussing these complex political dynamics with community members, students begin to see distinctions between ornamental policy and deeper reforms that can lead to systemic change (Stone, 2001, p.130). As Wilber Rich (1996) asserts, the “public school cartel” stands in direct opposition to wide civic mobilization or grassroots coalitions. When analyzing the context of school reform, conversations on school policy often address the changes that originate at the institutional level rarely include community voices. As students recognize that the power base of policymakers is not designed to reform itself in the interest of collaboration with students and teachers, they begin to think of themselves as an important voice that is purposely excluded from the public discourse. This omission is translated into the improper assumption that students cannot creatively contradict the expected norms of inequitable schooling, even those infused in “the encroachment of procedures for the rationalization and systems management” (Apple, 1995, p.82)

One of the primary characteristics of this tendency has been the insistence that standardized tests are adequate measures of educational outcomes. When test scores become a surrogate for school system performance, the challenges to discovering what factors facilitate or inhibit effective educational reform are fundamentally twofold:

First, standardized tests tend to be one-dimensional indicators, whereas educational goals are multidimensional. The choice of a particular style of examination and its content implicitly elevates one or two goals over others, with the result that some things that some citizens care about deeply may be pushed into the background. The second problem is that the casual links are loose and unmapped between what schools do and what children know (Stone, 2001, p. 125).

*Education for Human Development: The Power of the Pen*¹¹

In the introduction to *Writing Not Drowning: SAC Students Cross the River* (1999)¹² Pamela O'Brien, a clinical social worker, describes a collaborative workshop that she initiated with SAC. The workshop focused on writing, and brought students from Douglass High School into a setting where they met routinely with the youth that she was counseling as a part of their probation in the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Justice System. When telling the tale of the workshop's origin, she begins by describing the effect that Jim and an 11th grade student, Floyd Perry, had on professionals who attended the annual meeting hosted by the Mental Health Association of New Orleans. After Floyd read his essay, "Writing as a Path to Emotional Health," which opens the book of student writing, Pamela suggested that SAC work with her youth in a writing workshop. It was Floyd's openness when writing about his attempt at suicide that moved her as he said,

As much as I wanted to pull the trigger, to end the misery I was feeling, and to destroy the hatred inside of me, even if it meant destroying myself, I wouldn't do it. So I put the gun back on the shelf and went back to my room. I sat at my desk and closed my eyes for about 15 minutes. While I had my eyes closed, I think I was crying, because it looked like teardrops stained my paper. I opened my eyes and had an urge to write. I wrote for about three hours. I later called what I wrote "Memoirs of a Madman."

Floyd goes on to address his need for self-expression:

Dealing with these emotions is the reason I started writing. It was a way to vent my frustration, hatred, and all the rest of my feelings as well as love. I have, to date, 20 poems, 30 raps, and I am currently working on a play called, "Ghost Stories" which is mostly autobiographical. As a result, my mind is more at ease than it used to be, I'm a lot more disciplined, and, to me my life is closer to

¹¹ The McDonogh 35 newsletter dedicated to Students at the Center activities has the same name.

¹² This SAC compilation is one of the first books published for the program by Chapbooks for Learning. This, and the other seven books funded by Write to Change, are sold at public events and at the Community Book Center to generate revenue for Students at the Center activities.

normal than it was. And with the help of Mr. Randels, the pieces I have been writing are getting better. They are giving more detail and more background and are starting to make a little more sense (p. 4-5).

As Jim and other SAC teachers attest, meaningful classes that focus on writing are less dependent on a narrow curriculum than on a process of reflection and group discussion. For Students at the Center, that means always beginning from personal experiences and stories. As other students like Bruce Coleman point out, that process is key when giving students a way to express themselves and to relate to other young people. Bruce speaks from experience when he talks about the need for these outlets, and claims that the opportunity to be a youth leader at the Juvenile Justice writing workshop changed his life.

Expressing personal experiences

One Saturday afternoon in March of his senior year, I met with Bruce at PJ's coffeehouse on Frenchmen Street in the Faubourg Marginy. This PJ's is affectionately referred to as the "SAC office" because of the number of meetings Jim holds there each week with students and community partners. The coffeehouse is conveniently located between the McDonogh 35 and Douglass high schools, and the students that have worked with SAC often call PJs to catch up with Jim on the weekends. Student editors of the *Our Voice* newspaper usually meet there at least once a week to work on layout and revise articles for the next edition of the paper. That day Bruce was hunched over Jim's laptop as I arrived, hunting for new graphics to spice up the columns called "Quotes to Live By" and "Watch for News Mainstream Media Ignores."⁵

⁵ These features appeared in the May/June 2000 edition of *Our Voice*.

When I asked about his experience taking writing classes, Bruce replied, “Well the first time I worked with students on parole in the Juvenile Justice System in Jefferson Parish, it was wild. At one time, I was one of those students, being a troublemaker like them I was able to relate to them and kind of get into that reality again.” Bruce claims that before getting involved with SAC, he was a poor student and never developed a real interest in any class he took in school. At that point, his interest in writing was mainly focused on creating clever raps and rhyming with his buddies. Bruce says,

After we met with the social worker from Jefferson Parish, I wrote a poem, called ‘I Live My Life,’ about careers and goals and that gave me something to be proud of. Then I wrote an essay about why writing is important to my development. When the book came out, we had a book signing here at PJ’s. Through the SAC program I was able to let my writing skills show. And being involved in all the activities gave me an open mind and a better awareness of myself and my talents. I know that I am capable of do anything by learning and taking it seriously

The last part of his poem, “I Live My Life” talks about his new vision of the future, and alludes his past difficulties being expelled from school and arrested:

The street is a wheel of fortune game
 You think you gon’ make a fortune
 And then you go bankrupt.
 I live my life and strive to never go back
 To the streets/ I escaped that/
 Now I’m gon’ stay focused on my goals/
 To have a wife and beautiful black children
 And raise them right, so their dreams and goals
 Can be easier than what I had.
 I’m beating up the inner me,
 Until I realize I have to escape from the titanic streets.
 You never know when you gon’ sink.
 The streets are Chinese checkers
 Trying to kill me,
 A foreign slang confusing me
 From my dad to me,

Now I got to break that cycle, that repeat of a family history.
 I have to secure my goals.
 I always have to be buckled up.
 You never know when you're gon' crash.
 But at least I got away from living a book title called street life.

In a *Times Picayune* article written in late spring of the 1999-2000 school year, this kind of work is described as the bridge to “an emerging citywide movement by students to develop their skills while doing real work in the world of local media.”⁶ At the time SAC was operating in five inner-city schools and was expanding its writing projects based on poems, essays, and newsletters to publish books and produce the teen newspaper. Students at the Center was also beginning to venture into other forms of media by offering its first class in radio production. In the article, the reporter contrasted the SAC course, which was taught by guest artist Kalamu ya Salaam who worked at the radio station, with an extracurricular youth media project that also operated at community radio WWOZ.

Though both programs were funded by grants and required work on weekends and evenings in the editing suite, the reporter noted that as SAC grew into Marshall Middle School and two additional high schools, John McDonogh and Marion Abramson, “students not only make a difference by acting as mentors with the school, they also write for community groups and for the schools themselves, producing everything from books, and policy papers, to press releases to newsletters (*Times Picayune*, May 4, 2000).

⁶ This May 4, 2000 article features the headline, “Program acquaints students with the media” and accompanies a picture of SAC students, teachers and education scholars from William Carey College, Harvard, Stanford and Clemson who are affiliated with Breadloaf School of English.

Redefining terms and building healthy communities

The primary feature of the Students at the Center program is its insistence on maintaining student-teacher ratios of fewer than 15 students per teacher. In these settings students receive the individual attention they need to develop their writing skills as fully as possible. They train to comment on each other's writings and complete multiple drafts of essays, continually responding to feed back from classmates, guest writers, and teachers.¹⁵

Policymakers and educators have long debated the assertion that students benefit from small class sizes. But as Jonathon Kozol (1991) points out, rarely is the argument made that poor students, with records of poor academic performance, deserve the opportunity to learn in these settings. Students in need of extra attention have the most to gain from small class sizes and individualized attention. But the investment made in young people by district level education policy is rarely commensurate with student need, instead a hierarchy is reinforced that sorts families and neighborhoods by their place in the community power structure. Those with more clout get more voice in state and local school policies, and their children have more advocates that influence education policy, those without are tethered to accountability criteria that had virtually no input in creating.

A *Wall Street Journal* article asserts, "Indeed, our fixation on numbers—spending per pupil, teacher salaries, class size—may only be distracting us from more fundamental

¹⁵ This passage opens the introduction to an SAC book *Teen Sexuality: SAC Students on Sex Education, Relationships and Pregnancy* (1999). Jim authored the introduction and believes it is important to stress not only the end product of student work, but also the environment needed to help students to express themselves and build skills as learners and critical thinkers.

issues.... It is even possible to argue that schools themselves don't matter much, at least compared with parental influence.” Kozol argues:

The *Journal* expands on upon the theme that higher spending brings ‘diminishing returns.’ After a certain point, it says it makes only a ‘slight’ difference. This is an argument, which if valid, ought to be applied first to control the spending at the upper limits—in the schools that spend \$12,000 on each child for example. Instead, it is employed to caution against wasting further money in the schools where less than half that much is spent. So an argument which, if it is applicable at all, applies most naturally to wealthy schools is used instead to further limit options for poor children.... Affluent people, it has often been observed, seldom lack for arguments to deny others the advantages that they enjoy. But it is going a step further for the *Wall Street Journal* to pretend that they are not advantages at all. (pp. 134-135)

Though Jim argues that class size does make a difference, particularly in district schools where students get less individualized attention, he goes on to say, “SAC students benefit equally from community organizations that form in-depth partnerships with their classes.” One of the most enduring collaborations that Students at the Center has been involved in grew out of a writing project that engaged students in expressing their opinions about the health issues that they face as teens. That project was sponsored by the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies (IWES) and was the brainchild of its Chairperson, Dr. Denese Shervington.

When she recalls the first encounter between Students at the Center and the nonprofit organization that she founded, she speaks passionately about an essay contest that was the catalyst for the partnership. In 1997, IWES had funding for a media literacy project. They decided to begin by asking students to write on the topic of teen sexuality as part of a larger initiative to involve young people in reproductive health advocacy. Based on that encounter the Institute developed an ongoing relationship with Students at

the Center that has lead to partnerships on several projects such as a monthly teen talk show *Teen Expression* and the *Our Voice* newspaper.

As the Regional Medical Director for the Department of Mental Health for Louisiana State University, Denese talks about the impact that the student writing had on her colleagues when she involved them in judging the essays entered in the contest. She says,

I had the whole Public Health Department just so excited. When I read the quality of the writing that was in these essays, it felt like this is what happens when adults care about young people—we can positively affect their lives. I remember being in the meeting trying to decide which essays were going to win, and we were literally fighting! ‘We want this one! I want this one!’ I got a lot of my public health colleagues and people from the Institute to be panel on the of judges. We were up in arms! We were so energized by this ourselves.

As a psychiatrist and public health professional Denese sees direct connections between working within a community context and building a sense of personal empowerment. Before serving as the Under-Secretary to Surgeon General David Satcher in 1999, Dense founded the Institute because of her interest in creating a proactive agenda on reproductive health rights in communities of color. As a Jamaican woman who came to the United States two decades ago to receive her medical training, she is now a 10-year resident of the city and believes her work is contingent upon understanding the political challenges of the cultural landscape of New Orleans.

Though she worked for many years in the reproductive rights and sexual health movement with her medical colleagues, Denese came to the conclusion that if she was interested in working on women’s issues and development in the city of New Orleans, it

was important to include young people in the discussion. She describes the philosophy of co-workers at the Institute as a natural fit with Students at the Center :

I really think that the solution to many social problems that we have can be addressed with work that is being done by SAC. We keep the relationship going, because we want to support this kind of an approach to community development. I would like to see it as a model for community change. To my mind it's the only way to do it, to have people who care and are invested in the lives of young people who help to give them hope, to have a sense purpose and determination about work. It is important to have expectations for all of our youth.

Her positive interaction with SAC projects has also expanded the scope of her organization:

And so we believe it is very important to work in positive ways with educational systems, and SAC specifically, to improve the learning experience that young people have. If you look at young people who were successful as adults, you can see that a lot of things were in place for them. Unfortunately, in conditions of poverty and oppression many of things that are needed during the early years are not there. We are trying as best we can to put some of that in place for some of the young people in New Orleans. That is our purpose, and we are so committed to SAC because I think it is one of few organizations in the city that really takes this caring approach to individuals at the micro level.

Generating, acquiring, and managing information

The book *Teen Sexuality* was later published in 1999 from the writing collected in the four statewide essay contests sponsored by IWES on policy issues affecting teens. As a follow up, winners from Students at Center read their winning entries at an adolescent media conference that the Institute used to plan other youth media outlets, such as the monthly teen talk show and the citywide teen newspaper which was originally co-sponsored by the community-based organization, Crescent City Peace Alliance.

During that conference 120 students gathered from three public middle schools and three high schools to discuss sex education, relationships, pregnancy, and the

adult/media perceptions of teens. Kellye Bageon, one of the Students at the Center students who coordinated the event, said, “The purpose of the program was to have teens write on four issues and, in the process of writing, they would learn to think about the issues confronting them today. It was also a way for them to implement their ideas in a productive and positive way.”

After the event was covered by the local news, the youth involved realized the importance of continuing the work that they began, and the youth media and advocacy focus of SAC was informally born. Trennessa Walton, one of the conference participants, was happy with what had been accomplished, but she was not satisfied. She felt that creating a space for teens to voice their opinions in a closed setting was not enough, and more work needed to be done.

“Words without action are just noise, and we are not here to make noise,” she said as she spoke about the importance of teens having control over their own images and framing issues that affect their lives. In her essay, “Preventing Teen Pregnancy,” Shavon Charlot writes about the need for alternative ways of dealing with social issues as a community. She says:

For a teenager to respond maturely towards sex, the parents must be able to approach the subject in a mature manner. Society and the media can help this situation by taking the emphasis off the sexual act and placing it on human sexuality and commitment. If the media would provide outlets that display mature human sexuality, anatomy, and reproduction as positive images that can be witnessed on television or read in magazines, it may be a little easier for parents to talk about these subjects with their children.

Dr. Shervington and her staff created the Teen Expression talk show after they attended the forum hosted by SAC. With grant funds from the State Health Department,

teenagers who work on the show are trained to develop alternative television programming on subjects like sex, drugs, abusive relationships, violence, self-image, and media influences on teens. The show is also funded by the Louisiana Department of Social Services and has just completed its third season. Each episode is produced, written, hosted, and taped by a Core Group of teenagers at the local cable access studio Fox 8. Each year a new group of student participants from as many as 16 different high schools begin the season with a series of training sessions with local radio personalities, reporters, news anchors, and columnists.

As Denese points out, this approach to community learning requires that adults, in and outside of school, create an atmosphere that cultivates holistic development for youth. These are important aspects of the “invisible” level of community building that Fasheh (1995) advocates. From a psychological viewpoint, she believes that SAC offers something that is overlooked by the traditional institutional structures of urban education:

The school environment plays a significant role as a positive psychotropic factor, be it maintenance or corrective. With the current societal trend of working or absent parents and the absence of extended families and caretakers, many children enter into the school environment with a deficit in empathic stimulation.¹⁶ The result is a child with a fragmented sense of itself and with significant deficits in its self-esteem. Such a child usually compensates by engaging in a variety of acting out or under-achieving behaviors to seek attention and love.

In addition, she suggests that SAC is effective for community-building and empowerment:

¹⁶ In his text *The Analysis of the Self* (1972) Heinz Kohut described three essential functions for human development that he categorizes as 1) holding, 2) mirroring, and 3) facilitation. Kohut states that when these processes occur, the young child’s self esteem is enhanced, and the self becomes more cohesive. The young child’s ego therefore is a more organized ego, enhancing the ability of the child to learn, study, talk, think, and observe.

The very name, “Students at the Center” is symbolic of the kind of support that contributes to a healthy sense of self. My observations of the program over these years of collaboration have been that the participants do indeed become the ‘center of their classroom universe.’ And this is so important because many of these young students come from environments that are under-stimulating due to socio-economic deprivation.

This description offers a more complex understanding of the basis of learning outcomes and academic success than test scores by making clear connections between the lives of children and outside of school. This is not a revelation. Education scholars, school administrators, and classroom teachers all acknowledge that schools cannot effectively be the sole source of individual support and nurturing for young people. Reformers and policymakers, from the corporate school proponent to radical education theorist, all recognize that school is a powerful tool of socialization and formative development. The question is not *if* school practices influence young people’s sense of self and empowerment, but *how* and *why* schooling is designed to send specific messages to students.

Building social formations that create spaces of freedom

“Everyone has heard the phrases, ‘babies having babies’ and ‘children having children’ not once, but at least twice in their lives. But has anyone ever heard the phrase, ‘adults having babies with babies?’” asks Kimberly Mitchell, in an article she wrote for the January/February 2000 issue of *Our Voice*. Kimberly, a senior at McDonogh 35 wrote about this subject when her SAC Creative Writing class decided to focus on the issue of teen pregnancy for a class project.

Her teacher Jennifer Johnson had three sections of SAC that semester and found it difficult to get even the most talented students to work outside of class on journalistic

and other nonfiction writing assignments. Even with students who enjoy writing, she saw that initially they resisted creating time lines for their projects and going to meetings after class. She learned that students needed to be challenged to prevent them from waiting until the last minute to do their assignments. After getting to know her classes better, she realized that most of her students simply were not used to the kind of high expectations that came from being in a smaller class, where everyone was expected to fully participate each day. When asked what impact that environment has on students she claims,

This class functions like a support group. We share our writing, and talk. We all get to learn together in here. We choose topics that we are interested in and study them as a class. It's important for the students to learn this early on because they need real writing and research assignments, not just the standard research paper. This kind of work can teach them to synthesize information, and they need that skill. They just aren't getting it in other classes.

Jennifer's students always picked at least one social issue that was important to them and then built research and writing projects around central themes related to the topic. In one of her classes that I visited, students decided to focus on teen pregnancy. When asked why she chose that subject matter, Whitney, a junior, explained, "We decided to do a play as our community project, then we picked the most interesting topic to capture the other students' attention. That way, we can put real information into something entertaining, and other people can learn from it." This process of working collectively and substantively contributing to the class, echoes hooks (1994) assertion that at its best, education is "the practice of freedom" wherein:

As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence. Since the vast majority of students learn through conservative, traditional educational practices and concern themselves only with the presence of

the instructor, any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged.... Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community. (p.8)

The first day that I sat in on Jennifer's class, she was pushing the students to incorporate what they had learned during the previous months of reading and research into the play they were writing. When she asked them what was new about their work on such a familiar topic, Dana, a senior, said matter-of-factly:

We want to make this as realistic as possible. In the sex education we get in Health class, they don't even use real language. In our play the girls are sneaking into places with fake ID, and that's real. But younger girls need to know that can be hard to handle because when you meet someone and there is big age difference, guys can manipulate you with money and cars. Usually the girls are just so excited because he's older, they don't think about what they are getting themselves into.

Throughout the semester, students used the class as a writing workshop and developed individual pieces on the topic, which were eventually combined into one script. The play had six characters, three high school girls, and two young men in the twenties, and the main character's mother. Jennifer encouraged the class to pull in new facts that they learned while telling the story from their point-of-view.

In the latter part of the semester, the students began to plan a performance, and after some debate decided that school would be the best place to reach their target audience. Jennifer knew that her students needed help to put their writing on the stage and asked me if I knew of anyone in the community that might serve as partner to the class. I talked it over with Jim, and shortly thereafter a New Orleans-based arts educator and theater artist, Adella Gautier—better known as Adella Adella the Storyteller—

agreed to come in weekly as a guest artist to work with the students on their performance skills.

To prepare for the performance Jennifer required that her class write a formal letter to the school administration about the project. She also prompted them to create an announcement inviting community partners and parents to see the production. A subset of the class worked on these assignments and developed a brochure with little known facts on teen pregnancy for the audience. Kimberley worked hard creating and acting in the play, and also decided to write an article for the teen newspaper about the project. She says that she was motivated by what she learned, but knew that most of her classmates only hear part of the story about teen pregnancy:

Young people are more curious when things are not out in the open. This class is totally open. If more classes were like that they would teach the facts. Parents seem afraid and just kind of hope you know enough about sex to stay out of trouble, at least if you are a female. But hearing about these issues from your peers is different. In the end, its all about knowing yourself and having the information, because most teenagers are going to do what they want to do one way or the other.

She concluded her article in *Our Voice* by encouraging her peers to look more closely at the issue of teen pregnancy by placing it in a political and social context. Her analysis makes an important contribution to a larger community dialogue, and is worth quoting here:

According to Mike Males, author of *Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* (1995), 'Adults having babies with babies is not the kind of crowd-pleaser America's pop media is ready to spring on the supermarket checkout lines.' So the media would rather delight America with sugar-coated assumptions and leave the facts in small print. So the next time you hear or see those two famous phrases, 'babies having babies' or 'children having children' think about the following facts: in just one state, of births among girls age 11-15, 42.5% of the

fathers were age 19-25, and of births among mothers age 16-17, 56.1% of the fathers were age 19-24 (*Scapegoat Generation*, p. 7). And keep in mind the truth about teen pregnancy; it's often adults having babies with babies.

This kind of work exemplifies the use of media analysis and student-produced research that addresses the real issues, and the public perceptions, that impact on young people's lives. In this instance, the research that grew out of classroom work resulted in a collective effort involving the five steps of "writing for the community" (Goswami, 2002) including research, writing, collaborating, building skills, and communicating with the public (See Figure 4a.). This example of empowering pedagogy (Shor, 1992) mirrors the cycle of action research and the processes of education for human development described in the previous chapter. As an activist strategy "writing for the community" opens infinite possibilities for collaborative partnership that arise from community needs.



Figure 4a.

Developing shared values and community vision

Though school-based projects are conceived to compliment the work being done in classroom, there are many cases of SAC collaborations that are initiated by community members interested in building partnerships that can mobilize people on social issues.

When individual activists and artists offer their time and talents to work in classrooms with teachers and support students, they participate in a “pedagogy of possibilities and of agency” that Lawrence Grossberg (1992) argues helps to empower students to reconstruct their world in new ways. He says,

It is a pedagogy which demands of students not that they conform to some image of political liberation nor even that they resist, but simply that they gain some understanding of their own involvement in the world, and in the making of their own future. Consequently, it neither starts with or works within a set of tests, but rather, deals with the formations of the popular, the cartographies of taste, stability, and mobility within which students are located. It does not take for granted the context of specific cultural practices nor the terms within which they produce effects. It is a pedagogy which draws unexpected maps of the possibilities of the constraints on agency as it intersects with both everyday life and social formation’ (in Giroux and McLaren, 1994, p. 18)

No matter how the collaborations begin, when they are effective public education can become a mechanism for community development. Rather than impose preconceived constructs on the students, SAC mandates that collaborative processes include the perspectives of young people and members of their community in the learning process. From these partnerships, student narratives and cultural products act as the seeds of community building and empowerment where socially relevant topics are studied and used as a catalyst for action research. Unfortunately, state standards and school district reform policies do not carve out a specific space for this work within the structure of urban schools. But when partnering with community organizations, schools can become “a space of libratory praxis...where conditions may be created where students can tell their own stories, listen closely to the stories of others, and dream the dream of liberation” (McLaren, 1994, p. 217).

In an October 2000 article in *Our Voice* entitled “High School Students Learn About Children’s Rights,” students Damien Theodore and Ronnika Lavigne say that learning about global conditions helps students reflect on their experiences. They believe it is important to also understand the experiences other children and communities around the world, as they write,

We learned about children forced into labor and war, and read the United Nations Declarations of Rights for Children. But we also saw children doing great things in difficult circumstances.... There were pictures of how the children might look below every biography, but in place of their faces, were mirrors. This was a way to get onlookers of the exhibit closer to the children than just reading their story. (p. 1-2)

The article focused on a United Nations exhibit that public school students visited during a two-week display at the University of New Orleans, called “Treasuring the Future: Children’s Rights and Realities.” It presented stories and photographs of child factory workers, soldiers and activists doing positive things despite their oppressive circumstances.

Along with the article, a poem that Ashley Jones performed at the family day and cultural arts festival that was sponsored as part of the exhibit was published in the same edition of the teen newspaper. Her piece, “Circling Chocolate Suns,” deals with the reality of children that Ashley sees in her own community:¹⁷

I am moved when I see the teeth of little smiling
black children
laughing with their hands like dark guards over their tender mouths.
Their irises blossom into circling chocolate suns,
convincing each
other that laughter is no crime.

¹⁷ This poem also appears in the SAC book *Murdering Addictions, Weaving Nests* (2000) and is printed here with its original formatting.

These little black gods and goddesses laugh at their environment,
 servants submissive to their own future.
 Their little throats knock down atrocities like a rumbling
 constantly through the world's ears.
 And what the world hears makes them ashamed.

They thought they had captured these little spirits in
 the jungles of ghetto habitats,

that the hunger of survival would consume them.
 But the children's laughter echoes through the bloody
 waters
 And calms these street terrains.

Their shining white teeth scorch forgiveness in
 the backs of the guilty.
 Their laughter steadies the beat of young urban hearts,
 reminding them of when they too laughed, little
 black gods and goddesses,
 servants submissive to their own future.

Later when I talked to Ashley about what moved her to write the poem, she said that being in SAC made her look at the world around her and find ways to express what she sees and what she cares about in writing. This process of “making sense of experience” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p. 315) is important for all researchers and writers who “interpret and seek (emic) contextual, situated understandings” (Geertz, 1983, p. 87). Ashley's worldview in this poem shows evidence of a what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls a four-part, “self-defined Black women's standpoint as an Afrocentric epistemology” (p. 206) where,

Experience is the criteria of meaning with practical images as symbolic vehicles.... People become more human and empowered only in the context of a community.... The theme of talking with the heart taps the ethic of caring, and suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process.... An ethic of personal accountability is the final dimension of an alternative epistemology. (pp. 206-217)

Making Education Public with Community Networks

In 2002 the United States Department of Education issued a request for proposals from school systems interested in creating Smaller Learning Communities in public education sites. The New Orleans Public School System applied on behalf of McDonogh 35 and Frederick Douglass high schools, with a detailed plan for reaching student achievement benchmarks that coincide with the School Improvement Plans developed at each school. This proposed collaboration would bring the schools into partnership for the first time as they studied academic and community issues together. Students at the Center worked with principals at both schools and provided leadership on the cooperative vision of neighborhood involvement, which outlined the budget of just under \$1 million to pay for artists, teachers, students, and community-based organizations.¹⁸

The collaboration builds on the place-based social justice tenor of SAC writing activities, and uses cultural and social resources of the urban environment that begin interdisciplinary learning academies in the following areas: environmental justice, public health careers, local and African American history, narrative performance and visual arts, building trades, finance, and education. In the third year of implementation, community groups agreed to support the program as it included additional interests identified students and neighborhood partners. According to contributing members of the proposal, this partnership would be an indispensable vehicle to build academic skills that will meet state education standards, and train students in research and professional skills that are

¹⁸ In August of 2002 SAC received notification for the Department of Education that the project was funded. The Smaller Learning Communities initiative is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2002.

needed in the community.¹⁹ Adam Becker, Assistant Professor of Public Health at Tulane University, describes the project in this way:

This project can greatly contribute to community health in a number of ways. Firstly, the quality of education in the community is directly associated with the health of that community. Better-educated students have greater opportunities for employment and civic engagement while they are young as well as when they become adults. Second, teaching young people and learning with them about the role of the environment in community health helps to ensure a safer and cleaner community.

He also makes a connection between the urban environment, urban education, and holistic community improvement:

Through Tulane's involvement in this program students can learn about the importance of safe air, water, and soil. They can also learn about the risks associated with blighted housing, vacant lots, abandoned vehicles, and lack of safe space for recreation. Lastly, if the public health force itself better reflects the socio-demographic characteristics of the communities it serves, and includes more practitioners of color from a broad range of socio-demographic backgrounds, the field of public health will be better equipped to meet public health needs of communities.

With the support of community members like Becker, the proposal designed by Students at the Center makes explicit links between community life and classroom learning. This is an important proposition for urban educators and community builders. In the discourse on education there is growing demand for community as a subject and object of study, as well as a resource for learning (James, 1993). The allocation of federal funds for these kinds of educational projects suggests that the proliferation of

¹⁹ The grant application states that the need for the project is based on “the high-density poverty neighborhoods in which our students live and our school are located depend on us to provide a high level of education in order to help improve the entire community... In order to achieve a systemic analysis of the broader issues that impact education there is a need for staff development, deep community collaborations, and curriculum and instruction reform targeted at student interests, interdisciplinary approaches, and community improvement.”

evidence on student achievement and small class size (Molnar, et al., 1998) the influence of teacher networks on classroom practice is making inroads into the education policymaking arena.²⁰ The value of community-connected schools is being recognized and supported as means to enhance student learning.

Without coalitions of community members that can mobilize and bring resources to bear on the challenges facing urban schools, these learning experiences are largely unavailable to students in under-resourced urban areas with large school districts. The same can be said of Students at the Center, which is not a separate nonprofit organization, but a program that operates within the institutional context of the New Orleans school system. This institutional context poses several structural challenges to SAC that also reflective of the political and social environment in New Orleans. As I have argued, education pedagogy and reform initiatives do not take place in a political vacuum. The decisions made at the district level about what children should learn, how they will be assessed, and which schools are academically acceptable have material impact on community life and student achievement. The push for education “reform” in city schools has become a mechanism to systemize education and threatens to institutionalize cultural hegemony in the veiled the language of academic “standards” and student “proficiency.”

Bringing it All Together: A Pedagogy of Black Urban Struggle

Throughout this study I have attempted to make the case that any analysis of urban education must be attentive to individual and collective processes for

²⁰ This change marks a significant departure from the educational plan America 2000 set forth in 1993 by the Bush administration, and its successor Goals 2000 created under Clinton’s Presidency. Both of these policies set national education goals and offered generic strategies for meeting academic standards with no attention given to local social context or collective participation with teachers, parents, and student.

empowerment and self-determination. No exploration of these issues would be complete without considering the importance of culture, both lived and commodified (Apple, 1995) and its impact on schools. It is in this context that we find possibilities for agency and community building. In this study these issues are particularly salient because of the participatory emphasis of the SAC program and its focus on community-based research.

One expression of agency and community building is the writing workshop approach that is the foundation for all SAC media work. In each school it takes different forms, such as the “Writes of Passage” exchange between students from Marshall and McDonogh 28 middle schools and SAC high school students. In projects like this one, students in various classes write about subjects that they discuss in class and share their ideas with students from other schools.

A similar workshop was started with Saving Kids Unlimited, a nonprofit organization established in 1995 by a local activist Harry Haynes. As a way to expand his work with young people from the federal housing projects, Harry partnered with students from Douglass High School who met twice a week after school with a group of 9-to-12 year-old boys. The students began as pen pals and decided that their work should be published collectively in the form of *Saving Kids Unlimited: Honoring Grandmothers, Places and Writing* (1999).

Creating cultural products for community learning

Two years later a new group of “Harry’s kids” started coming to McDonogh 35 once a week after school to work with a SAC teacher Katie Hunter. With her help, high school students participated with them in peer writing workshop that produced *Locked Away and Lifted Up: Prison, Punishment and Liberation* (2001). The book on prison

issues came about because SAC teachers began to realize that a number of their students had at least one parent who had been incarcerated for a significant period of time. As students discussed their lived experience in class and wrote personal essays, the subject of prison routinely became part of the picture that the young people painted of their families and neighborhoods. For the youth in Harry's program, nearly 100 percent of them had fathers who were incarcerated.

"Minds and souls need not be locked in a prison created by their fathers," Katie asserts when talking about the value of writing to deal with these subjects individually and collectively. She believes that having a space to talk and think about these kinds of issues in a school setting made the students more willing to write and revise their work, and motivated them to try harder in class. They found their voices and put in extra effort so their writing could be included in the published volume. After working closely with the younger kids, some of the high school students began exploring prison issues in their own way. They also problematized the subject of punishment and the rules and regulations that limit their self-expression. In a piece entitled "Student Pledge," Zahn Patin uses irony to critique school policies as he writes about the forms of authority and social reproduction (Apple, 1993) that take place in many public schools:

As a student of the New Orleans Public Schools, I understand that wearing my ID is the key to my success. I understand that being individually unique is unacceptable and does not help solve problems. I understand that wearing regular loafers and black socks is unnecessary and harmful to my learning. I therefore pledge to sacrifice what makes me, me, play by your rules, give up on what I believe in, and get over it in order to make my superintendent and school administration proud of me.

When seeking to understand the links between school practices and measures of academic success, the work produced by students and the collaborative projects developed with teachers and community members are valid empirical indicators.²⁰ For participants in Students at the Center, the perspectives articulated by student writing and media are powerful examples of program's merit as a catalyst for social change. This element of the program illustrates,

A growing movement in education, for an emancipatory use of media materials in the classroom, by helping students to locate oppositional readings...to stress that culture isn't what is legitimated in books and other instructional materials. It is also a sociological substance produced every day by each of us. (Trend, p. 234; in Giroux and McLaren, 1994)

Because all writing and media present a point-of-view, it is important to acknowledge that the same is true of the work produced by young people. In the case of SAC, the importance of voice and viewpoint are stressed as part of a pedagogy of liberation and social justice. When writing the mission statement in the first proposal to the Open Society Institute's Youth Initiatives Program, Jim and I talked about how student media fit in with the SAC writing classes and the overall vision of community building. We knew that if the proposal was funded it would launch the first Youth Media program of its kind in the city's public school system. As we worked on the grant, we talked about the rationale for reaching the funding agency's targeted "urban and at-risk

²⁰ Poor educational performance on standardized tests has put school reform on the national public agenda. At present, reformers are being pressed to identify indicators and common standards that can allow them to categorize which school systems are deficient and in what areas. On the other hand, policy analysts are challenged to find common indicators of success that can be used to test theories on what factors are necessary for effective educational reform (see Stone, et al., 2001). In both of these processes, there is a tension between looking to the outcomes (such as test scores and policy changes) or inputs (such as public revenue and collective effort) as the key to improving schools. It is my suggestion that both are important elements that must be looked at in the context of pedagogy and community values.

population” with a school-based media program. The grant application summarized the argument in these words:

The SAC program believes that a radical incursion into the public school system is necessary to meet the challenge of demoralized schools head on. The program is designed to build a critical mass of students who can support each other in producing meaningful, quality programs at their school. SAC students also serve community groups who want to help develop students who have a vision of education as community development rather than simply individual achievement. The challenge we face in creating youth media in this environment involves changing school climates. Our response to this challenge is to establish long-term, in-depth presence at the school embodied in the SAC program’s classroom focus.

As SAC prepared to include a media component into its work, we thought about this kind of research and writing as yet another vehicle for student empowerment and participatory activism with the larger community. After much dialogue on the how to structure the grant application, little went into giving a detailed description of the evaluation methods. We knew that the method of assessment needed to look at performance and capacity (see Figure 4.b). We also knew that as a participatory self-evaluation, it should reflect the grassroots community development approach of Students at the Center (Patton, 1997; Uphoff, 1991).

Uses of Participatory Action Research

PHASES	PURPOSE	PROCESS	ASSESSMENT
Articulating problems	Addressing practical problems	Understanding problems in context	Does the research benefit or exploit community members?
Deciding what should be done	Community sets research agenda	Collective learning for action	Did the community determine what was important to research?
Developing Concrete Actions	Social Change and New Knowledge	Building institutional capacity	Is the information gained useful to the community?

Figure 4b.

Later I came up with this simple tool for reflection and assessment based on a PAR framework. The organizational culture of SAC was most certainly one “committed to ongoing learning...and the utilization of systematically collected and socially constructed knowledge” (Patton, 1997, p. 99-100). In creating media, students needed to understand that the work they produce should contribute to the community-based research capacity of the program while building their skills as learners. With this new frontier on the horizon, Students at the Center was about to take a quantum leap forward in media production and media advocacy.

CHAPTER 5

Youth Media and Community Building

There is a growing sense that media constitute the primary sources of identity formation, supplanting roles formerly held by school, church, and the family. Rather than seeing this as a negative phenomena, educators and parents should acknowledge the importance of media in cultural life, and work to harness this power in productive ways. (Lusted, 1991, p. 5)

When the Students at the Center program got the Youth Media grant, funders from the Soros Foundation Open Society Institute (OSI) stressed that SAC was the first school-based program that it funded in three years of youth media grant making. They decided to take this a leap of faith after students and teachers advanced a compelling argument for the importance of starting this kind of work in urban classrooms so that the students they hoped to reach would have a chance to develop a passion when learning about media. When the program officer visited New Orleans and sat in on SAC classes at McDonogh 35 and Douglass, she told us that she believed the SAC program could train students to be skilled producers and consumers of media.

After talking with teachers and students she understood the purpose and process for doing this work in classrooms as a three-tiered approach. First, SAC argued that the best way to teach youth media skills was to rely on the energy and interest of the students, and envision that pool of talent as the best natural resource in public schools. Secondly, through intensive writing and critical thinking instruction in small class settings urban students could magnify that power. Lastly, by becoming the creators of

alternative media with the active participation of community partners, the Students at the Center program could integrate its institutional, methodological and community contexts while building skills, creating capacity, and emphasizing youth perspectives.

Traditionally these learning opportunities have been reserved only for students in the private, parochial, and magnet schools of New Orleans. Because SAC was committed to challenging these injustices, the program was invited to consider participation in the OSI School Reform initiative as well.

According to the grant-makers, the words of students made the proposal especially persuasive. In a September 1999 letter to the Director of Youth Initiatives, McDonogh 35 radio production students Tralane Mercadel and Adriane Frazier, included their thoughts about working with a guest writer in their class for an entire semester. They argued that a grant from OSI could fund a youth media program to reach disadvantaged students and provide learning experiences that allowed them to critique the sources and structures of disadvantage in our society. They said,

SAC students have already begun to change the perceptions people have of the disadvantaged and underprivileged youth in New Orleans. Only through financial support can the students already involved in the program continue to make a difference by involving a wider variety of teen and community leaders. With help from the Youth Initiatives Program, young people in New Orleans can reach the community through the world's valued tool, the media. Your funding will allow the facilitation of programs that are initiated by students who have expressed interest in transforming the environment around them for the better.

Defining Praxis: Training

In August 2000 edition of *Offbeat*, a monthly periodical produced in New Orleans dedicated to music, radio and live performance, the story "Community Images Project"

reported on group of six local students that attended the National Federation of Community Broadcasters Conference annual convention in San Francisco earlier that year. SAC students went to the conference along with Jim, and Kalamu ya Salaam, a media specialist who taught them radio production. While there, the SAC collaborative played a CD of original radio commentaries for an audience of broadcast professionals and youth radio producers. The students were excited to have a finished product to distribute among the youth radio producers who could play their CD at stations around the country. It was the second visit for SAC to the Community Broadcasters Conference, and this time the students had more experience with sound editing, writing for radio, and audio production.

On a rainy Thursday morning one year before, I met three SAC students at the Radisson Hotel in downtown New Orleans for the first annual meeting of National Youth Radio. That year, a junior at McDonogh 35, Towanna Pierre, and another student from Los Angeles, were invited to lead a session on commentary writing with. Towanna was a member of the first SAC youth media team, made up of three young women who called themselves Newbian. That day the other two juniors, Adriane Frazier and Ashley Jones, came to contribute to other listening sessions and panels on radio production, while Towanna talked about the commentaries their class had written.

The subjects she and her classmates wrote about ranged from the exploitation of women in music videos and the economic exploitation of black youth by the fashion industry, to racist standards of beauty for women and racial profiling by the police force. Before her 10:30 session Towanna was nervous. She stretched her six-foot frame in the hotel lobby to relax and went over with the three of us the important points with the three

of us that she hoped to make while co-facilitating the workshop. Towanna learned radio production during her junior when she was enrolled in Jim's Creative Writing class. In her years at McDonogh 35, Towanna took three SAC writing courses, including a Black Studies, and a Media Internship in her senior year, after OSI funding provided the program with digital audio-video equipment. After graduating as Valedictorian of the class of 2000, she looked back on her media work and described it as a learning experience grounded in "a politics of representation" (Mohanty, 1989) :

SAC classes gave me a way to learn about other people's perspective, so you can analyze what they think, and look at it in relation to what you think and are feeling. A lot of teachers say they will give you the motivation to learn, but I don't think they do. They don't focus on learning for learning sake. From my experience, they don't encourage you to read anything outside of your assigned work. Once I was in SAC, I did get encouraged to just read for knowledge's sake, so I can learn more about the world and about myself. SAC has helped me to recognize the ability to look outside myself and not be Towanna—and see things solely from a young black woman's perspective, but look outside of a situation and see how another person can feel about it. That's weird to me, that SAC as a school-based project was so personal for me.

That year Towanna spent weekends and many late afternoons with Kalamu and other sound technicians mastering the skills to lay down music and a montage of student voices for the introduction played before each student commentary. Of the three-member Newbian production team, Towanna was the one most interested in learning the sound-editing software. During first period, when other students were delivering their essays in their best radio voices, she was working the boards at WWOZ radio station where the class gathered to record their commentaries.

Facilitating Empowerment: Academic Skill-Building

Towanna worked hard to have some of recordings ready for the presentation and opened her discussion on commentary writing by telling the audience that her class began learning how to write 30- and 60-second radio spots by sitting in circle and discussing things that they were passionate about. As an example of the finished product that was played on the community radio station, she played Track 4, a piece written by fellow student Ashley Jones:

(INTRO)

Voice 1: Here are the real views of 13 teenagers...

Voice 2: No, young adults!

Voice 3: Picked to do a radio project

Voice 4: People always telling us, you kids have no idea what's going on

Voice 5: Don't you have any sense?

Voice 6: Well, if really want to know...

Voice 7: Really, really want to know, here it is!

Male 1: Ohh, dog! Look at her! Baby got a bomb body...

Male 2: Yeah, man. I know what I'd like to do with that!

Ashley: Eww! Why do have to drool all over, like a pack of hound dogs?

Tell me this—why is it on every video there has to be a half-naked overly sexy female?

Male 1: Oh girl, you are just jealous because you don't look like that.

Ashley: Whatever!

that's how it is at my house—my brother and his friends in front of the TV glued to some woman's breasts, butt and everything else she is showing.

Whatever happened to the desirable female, who keeps her clothes on?

I know you are saying it's just TV, but it's more than TV when you associate every nice looking female with thongs and baby oil.

Let's be real—how many days have you walked outside to a million beautiful half-naked women?

Guys face it—real life is not a video shoot.

This commentary was one of the SAC pieces that sparked a lively discussion at the conference. After her session Towanna had a list of names and addresses for youth radio stations that wanted a copy of the finished CD.

Because of the physical proximity of WWOZ to McDonogh 35, students were able to work with Kalamu each week in school and walk over to the radio station during class time when it was time to record the commentaries. Kalamu and Jim took each piece through several revisions and engaged the class in discussions to give students feedback. In the process, great emphasis was placed on writing targeted messages to specific audiences.

By the end of the 1999-2000 school year the response to the radio work was so positive that Kalamu was interested in expanding the media component in the schools he visited. Towanna co-wrote two grants with Jim, one to the Brown Foundation for service-learning projects and another to the Jordan Foundation, which brought in additional money to combine the radio with oral history projects. In the year-end report to the Jordan Foundation entitled, "Writing to Learn: Audio Programming and Original Writing on New Orleans Civil Rights and School Reform Workers," Jim describes the need for creative outlets for his students to learn history:

This year my students began a weekly after-school meeting in which they discussed the history, politics, and value of rap music. A goal of the meetings was also to help students understand the history of Africans in America. At one point, Bruce Coleman asked a fellow rapper and group member, Le Shawn, if he could rap about anything at all. Accepting the challenge, his classmate said 'for sure.' Bruce then asked him why he did not rap about heroes in black history. LeShawn replied that he really did not know about any heroes, except for someone super famous and constantly featured such as Martin Luther King, Jr.

After the learning that students wanted to learn more on black culture and historical events through the “Rap on Rap” program, SAC began to build partnerships with American History classes to research civil rights and public education leaders in the New Orleans past and present. Students interviewed community leaders, like Jerome Smith, about his participation in the original freedom rides and freedom schools. Other community partners included University of New Orleans history professor Raphael Cassimere, who talked to students about his leadership in the local NAACP youth chapter, while Joyce Hawthorne, Assistant Principal at John McDonogh High School, shared her experiences working with the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. This direction opened another avenue for student research and writing that would serve as the basis for media work to come.

The Personal as Political: Creating Capacity

The techniques of qualitative research became more directly applicable to the media work when students began to seek out local activists and family members for their memories of involvement in civil rights and public education movements. To meet the RPF requirements of the educational grants that ask for “The Measurement of Student Learning,”¹ students argue that the primary measure of their learning should always be the work they produce. For the Jordan Foundation project, their work began with journal entries “reflecting what they learned from readings, oral histories and radio production,” along with publishable writings “inspired by their research into civil rights leadership in

¹ The wording quoted here is taken directly from the Jordan Foundation final report from Students at the Center, dated May 2000.

New Orleans.” These personal writings based on student research were to be turned into a series of journalistic and creative publications, led by veteran SAC students, professional writing consultants, and teachers. Eventually, selections of these were turned in audio commentary and documentary pieces.

The final measure of success that SAC stressed was in sharing their work with others through “dissemination to other students and community members.” For this reason, writing and media projects always include public readings at community functions and gathering places, like the Community Book Center. It is a part of the program’s philosophy to produce public presentations as measures of educational accountability. This is part of the contributions that students make to a larger dialogue with local organizing efforts so that “community leaders can see what the students have done to contribute to public knowledge of our heroes and their struggle for human rights” (final report, the Jordan Foundation, 2000).

Towanna Pierre’s poem “Down to the River of Dryades and Claiborne Avenues” grew out of that project and contributes to the struggle for social justice by honoring Jerome Smith. Jerome is a prominent community activist and is known for ongoing work on the multiple terrains of New Orleans civil rights struggle. After researching his life, she imagines the experience of growing up in New Orleans in the 1950s and sets the poem in the neighborhoods that were central to the local civil rights movement:

Purple and marigold feathers
 Caress brilliantly luminous
 Obsidian cheeks.
 Beads glitter like precious
 Gems on sparkling turquoise
 Headdresses.
 Majestic white crowns

Reach imperiously to
 The heavens.
 Wonder-filled eyes peer
 From between jean-clad
 Legs.
 Vibrant colors dance
 In hazel pools as
 Tootie Montana's
 Melodic chants penetrate
 Chocolate souls.

Jerome's tiny feet follow along the
 Time-worn banks of the
 Sultry Mississippi.

Follow down Dryades to fight for
 Integration.

Follow to the ivory guarded
 Countertops where pale eyes
 Shoot ice-coated daggers.

Follow to the palatial meccas of
 Education where the haves prosper
 And the have-nots perish.

Follow to teach the children
 And make Freedom Summer
 Last for decades.

Follow to keep culture alive
 Even when concrete swallows
 Trees.

Follow to lead.

This poem is included in the SAC book *Sankofa* (2001) for which Towanna co-wrote the introduction:

This collection of writings suggests another way of defining accountability. In small classes of no more than 15 students, SAC students have developed pieces in this and other SAC Press collections. SAC students do not just learn history and

share it on a test that no one reads. They analyze history through the experience of themselves, their families, and their communities. They make their education accountable to their families and communities in terms of the work they produce and legacy they continue.

Towanna's poem is an illustrative mix of cultural and historical influences that permeate SAC writing and media, and act as the glue for "a community of memory" (Bellah, 1985). Retaining community memories is important to SAC because:

In order not to forget the past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constructive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community. (Bellah, 1985, p. 153)

In New Orleans one of the defining features of the community is the preservation of cultural expression and lived history evident in the built environment and public spaces. The tourist economy on which the city depends is built around the appeal of New Orleans music, food, culture, and sense of historical memory embodied in neighborhoods with commercial buildings and residencies that are centuries old. This love of history does not insulate the community from the deleterious effects of neighborhood changes however. In fact, it magnifies the feeling of loss when communities are displaced and whole neighborhoods are destroyed by outside forces.

Dealing with Displacement: Taking Community Action

HOPE VI, the federal legislation to redesign public housing communities and replace them with mixed income developments, has had a significant impact on the

landscape of New Orleans.² As the families living in these communities have moved away, the schools in those neighborhoods have changed dramatically. In New Orleans, one of the largest public housing developments in the city, the Florida Avenue/Desire community, was among the first in the city to be dismantled by HOPE VI. “Desire,” as is it called, sits in close proximity to several SAC schools, but is within a few blocks of Carver High School. Most of the students at Carver High and Carver Middle lived in the Desire, and as the community changed so went the school. The schools are referred to as “ghost towns” by staff, a change they directly attribute to the 1,784 units that have been demolished in the Desire in the last four years. Today, the abandoned community looms vacant, though residents in 14 of the 76 remaining units still temporarily call it home.

In 2002, two SAC teachers from different schools collaborated on a project to involve their students in a study of the destruction of federal housing developments. They realized that this policy was changing the neighborhoods and schools where they taught, and had a profound impact on their students, so they decided to incorporate it into their curricula.³ In these courses, students looked at the impact of this public policy in terms of its affect on urban neighborhoods. Dan Konecky, who was teaching part-time at Carver High School partnered with Rachel Breunlin, a first year teacher at John McDonogh.

² The debate surrounding the changes in the U.S. public housing policy is a national one. In urban areas around the country, city residents have been impacted by their local housing authorities’ implementation of HOPE VI passed by Congress in 1992, and later the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHWRA) of 1998. For case study analysis of these policies see Larry Keating’s “Redeveloping Public Housing: Relearning Urban Renewal’s Immutable Lessons,” *Journal of the American Planning Association*. 66:4, 385-397, (Autumn, 2000).

³ At the time, Dan was teaching at Abramson in New Orleans East, and at George Washington Carver, which sits aside the Industrial Canal. This school is located just blocks from the Desire housing development that was once home to hundreds of families. Approximately 35 families remain as residents in the Desire community at the present time.

I met Rachel a few years before, when she was entering the Urban Studies Master's program in Applied Anthropology at the University of New Orleans. Through her activist work, she started a relationship with SAC by volunteering at John McDonogh as part of the Fred Hampton Youth Action Committee. Her work further entwined with the SAC when she was a student worker at the University of New Orleans Women's Center and a participant in Community Labor United forums. When she expressed interest in becoming a classroom teacher for two sections of an SAC course, Rachel talked about her motivation to do more work with the community where she lives. She believed her familiarity with the neighborhood provided an opportunity to share personal and family stories with the students and connect them to local and African American history. Her academic training made her particular interest in the importance of place and identity an ideal springboard for a SAC class.

At the end of academic year, Rachel produced an exhibit at a local art gallery consisting of professional photographs of the Desire community from the 1960s to the present. Student writings were included as text in presentation, entitled *Displaced*, and focused on their perspectives and personal experiences with neighborhood change in their public housing communities.⁴ She worked closely with five professional photographers who had been documenting the Desire through the years and with Dan's class that had been writing about what the changes they saw in their neighborhood and school when the Desire was demolished. Rachel reflects on the value of the project and the importance of putting personal knowledge in historical context with classroom work:

⁴ Around that time Douglass High School freshman Brandon McDaniel won second place in *My Louisiana Contest* for his essay, "My Louisiana: Moving Away from Desire". The school district Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) sponsored the contest, and awarded Brandon for his personal essay on what it was to grow up in the Desire and later be forced to leave his school and his home.

When I have shown the kids the black and white photos, some of them recognize people that they grew up with and haven't seen since people have been moved out. And when I talk to them about the history of public housing they can't believe that it was not built for black people. Something changes for them when I show them photos of whites that lived in the projects on the other side of town forty years ago.

The *Displaced* exhibit came as a result of a multi-faceted collaboration. Rachel showed students old photos and asked them to react in writing by sharing their memories and thoughts on the neighborhood. In the process the Carver High School principal, the Florida/Desire Development Council, and SAC saw the benefit of asking students to remember their neighborhood before and after it was demolished.

After the exhibit opened, all the partners were joined on a panel with a representative from the local chapter of Neighborhood Housing Services to discuss the history of housing policy and its impact on the African American community.⁵ All of the partners agreed on the value of helping students to identify with uplifting stories of struggle for social justice, engendering “a sense of community” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) that connects them to others, magnifies their power, and validates their participation in community affairs (Baum, 1997, p.266). As students produced and shared more of their work, the Students at the Center program found itself in the happy predicament of mounting requests for students to contribute their skills to community projects.

Jim and I began to talk about the need to apply the SAC methodology to train students and increase their academic skills, so they would have the capacity to create alternative media to tell their own stories. Though there was no SAC curriculum

⁵ For a detailed analysis see: *Urban Planning and the African American Community In the Shadows*, by June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf (1997).

specifically designed for media, we were able to enroll students and teachers in a Media Literacy program sponsored by the Tulane School of Public Health the same summer that we won the OSI grant. Yet our vision was more expansive than simply teaching students to be more savvy consumers of mainstream images and advertising. Shortly thereafter, the opportunity to create a specific SAC media pedagogy and curricula came serendipitously from within the dedicated community of learners.

*Writing with Text, Sound, and Light*⁶

In the July of 2000, I attended a birthday party for friend's 4-year-old niece. At that party I ran into Kalamu, grandfather to the birthday girl, who I knew well from his previous work with SAC radio classes. Before we were personally acquainted, I was aware that his plays had been anthologized in several volumes dedicated to black theater in the United States, and I already owned two of his four collections of essays and poems published in 1970s through the 1990s. Locally, Kalamu is known from his radio show on WWOZ, the "Kitchen Sink," from his New Orleans based company, Runagate Publishing; and as the founder of the NOMMO Literary Society. After watching him work so diligently with SAC students it was easy to see him as a social activist and longtime cultural worker in the city, and forget his internationally distinguished career as playwright, music critic, and poet.

Students often don't know about of his work as a writer until they see his poems included in a class text, *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry*

⁶ This is the title of the original curriculum of the Media Training workshops that Kalamu ya Salaam uses to teach educators and students what he calls the Neo-Griot concept. In traditional African societies, a griot is an elder and wisdom-keeper for a community through the oral tradition of storytelling. The concept of the Neo-Griot, according to Kalamu, is "using basic storytelling structures in media writing, audio production and digital video making."

(Ward, ed., 1997). But his credentials as a community educator, which pre-date his published work, began with an after-school program at the Boys Club in the Lower Ninth Ward in 1968. Later he and his brother Kenneth Ferdinand, the owner of the PJs coffeehouse that often hosts SAC, were part of the group that opened two culture-centered schools that began in 1971 and operated until the mid-1980s. By the early 1970s his passion for writing led him to do various writing workshops, including a four-year stint as a Creative Writing teacher for junior high schools.

On the day of our chance meeting, Kalamu had brought along a video he made to show his son and former wife, who was working on her PhD in Education at LSU. The short was prepared as Kalamu's contribution to a Race & Technology conference in London. In a back bedroom away from the celebration, the four of us crowded around his son's iMac to watch the 4-minute digital video piece that synopsized his essay. When it was over I asked Kalamu if he could teach students to use digital video as part of a \$75,000 Youth Media grant that SAC received from the Open Society Institute.

When he asked how he began teaching documentary and narrative video production to high school students, Kalamu tells this story and points out that neither of us had experience with the technology when we first planned the collaboration. But we both have a belief that these media skills could be a powerful teaching and learning tool, especially for young people in urban schools. When I first broached the subject he was dubious because of his commitment to working at the grassroots with programs that were not constrained by institutional structures. Six weeks later, in an August planning session with Jim at the Treme residence that serves as his office, the three of us talked about the vision for incorporating the Youth Media component into the SAC program.

“This is a priority because in the next two to three years this will be the only way to reach people,” Kalamu asserted as we talked about the need for urban youth to create their own media images. As the discussion turned to teaching veteran writing students how to apply their skills by using technology, Jim said that he saw it as way to have students write their own pieces and have a wider public space to explore topics through multiple media. Although the SAC program was moving in that direction, it needed the help of community partners to build collaborations that would yield new knowledge about the social and cultural landscape of students’ lives.

Earlier that summer ten SAC students from five schools had taken part in a Web design course offered by the Xavier University Center for the Advancement of Teaching. When the administrator for the program, Elizabeth Rhodes, met with Jim to discuss submitting a proposal so that his teaching colleagues could be trained in Web design, he insisted on having students learn those skills. For four weeks, middle and high school students were paid by the grant to go the campus with two adult advisors, where they learned the basics of building Web pages and writing HTML programs. Though the technical skills were important, the vast majority of the time was spent writing a formal design document for the Students at the Center Web site.

I took part in those sessions and listened as students debated what the Web site should contain to “represent” Students at the Center. In the end they created *New Orleans UnMasked*, a site dedicated to local heroes and cultural leaders that would feature student research, interviews, and creative writing along three basic themes that they identified: historical heroes, cultural influences, and community activism. Many of the students who worked on the original document have graduated, changed schools, or no longer take

SAC courses. The original design document is included in the book *Sanfoka* (2001), and each year new student work from all classes is added to the topics it outlines, including the Haitian Liberation battle and 1811 Slave Revolt; Jim Crow laws; New Orleans youth in the Civil Rights Movement; Hurricane Betsey; local food, music, and creative arts; and justice movements in the arenas of education, labor, and prison issues.⁷ In the words the students that authored the Web site outline:

To many all across the nation, New Orleans is known for great festivals such as Mardi Gras and unforgettable food such as gumbo and jambalaya. Ask any tourist or native where to go to have a good time, and they can probably give a long list of things to do and places to see. But ask them where the slaves marched during the 1811 Slave Revolt, and you might get the silent treatment.... SAC students will present to site visitors heroes and the events in which they proved themselves. By honoring the people and events of New Orleans' past and present, tourists and natives can appreciate this city for what it really is, a resting place for heroes.

To continue that work through other media, Kalamu developed a curriculum that includes perspectives on the reasons for writing, elements of good storytelling for specific audiences, the ways to shoot video, and technical aspects of editing. At the end of the first year of work, the Neo-Griot concept was being put to work in four inner city schools. Though the media program began at McDonogh 35 with students who had taken radio courses, each semester SAC has used part of its funding to offer classes at new school sites.

By December of 2000, Newbian were using their video skills for original productions, documenting community events, and applying technology to peer teaching and mentoring to younger students. The three young women that made up Newbian were

⁷ Students outlined a detailed list of community biographies, poetry, and essay subjects that should be included in each section. Great emphasis was placed on identifying living heroes and contemporary stories from family members and community activists.

already strong writers, and had been in at least one year of SAC writing classes before they used the flexibility of their schedules as seniors to dedicate afternoons to working with Kalamu from 1:00-3:30 pm. I sat in with four of them as they met each day in room 306, a space that doubles as the Africana Studies Center for the school.

I watched as they built the skills to go out to do video shoots, interview community members, and present their work at public events. At first they would kid me about my incessant note taking, but when they wondered what was going into my notebooks, I shared my records of classes and discussion with them and asked for their reactions on my own reflective notes about what I saw. We discussed the issues of empowerment, social justice, and identity. We also talked about the meaning of community and the importance of activism.

While they learned with Kalamu, they often discussed the fact that developing a community vision meant that they needed to produce their own knowledge and to redefine themselves according to their own ideas. The following is an excerpt of class discussion that took place on September 19, 2000, just three weeks into their media internship:

Kalamu: Today when I went to a class at Douglass, Jim made a point that part of the problem with magnet schools is that they are a holdover from segregation. He told the students if you didn't have magnet schools like a 35, students like you all be at Frederick Douglass, and it would change the environment.

Towanna: Are you going to Douglass with the radio class?

Kalamu: No, we will start over there with digital video because we can learn that and sound mixing all at once. I'm trying to teach radio there now, but its hard. I am trying just to get to the place where they break out of the negativity around them. It's not a school, it's a prison.

Towanna: Radio stuff is complicated, the only way I learned it was spending a lot of

time at WWOZ. Cuts and transitions are easier on video than on radio.

Kalamu: We want to fight the brain drain model, where the best and brightest are skimmed and the all the energy, creativity, and power are sucked away to work for someone else's interest. Then you have no organizing in your own community.

Ashley: Can we do a documentary about Douglass High School?

Kalamu: Let's do a cross documentary and teach them to do one on 35. They will see 35 very differently than you all do, I bet.

Adriane: I kind of agree with what you said about brain drain I guess, but then how do we organize our own people?

Kalamu: Ultimately change is not about figuring out how you all can make Douglass a little better. The issue is leadership. We need to develop leaders as a community. What do you think that means first—mass activity for numbers or smaller numbers for quality? You can't ignore one or the other.

Towanna: We need quality first but how can we get people to listen to us? To students we might seem condescending, and adults just ignore what we say most of the time.

Kalamu: What interests me most about working with you all as team is that I am teaching, and I am learning how all this technology can be used at the same time. It's as much a laboratory as anything else. You all are the leadership. What I really like is that spirit that's here to take this to another level.

Towanna: I know there is a dramatic change in my belief since having Mr. Randal's class. My point of view has expanded. Now I am always questioning but I see that I'm still at the point where a lot of my opinions come from someone else.

Ashley: Actually, his class was the first time where as students we were asked what our opinions were. The first time Mr. Randels said that I thought, 'What do you mean, what do *I* think?' We aren't taught think like that, or to question teachers. That's why I think it's scary that these are our future leaders, but no one encourages us to think for ourselves.

Adriane: I know that I learn best in a small group where you can really talk. In other classes teachers usually don't ask open-ended questions and you don't have any room to discuss what you are learning or reading.

Towanna: So, when does having power and privilege become a sin? Isn't being at 35 a privilege?

Kalamu: The question is, what do you do with that privilege? The ruling class is always teaching the disempowered to eschew power. But this program exists because some people are trying to make change. It's not just a school activity.

Towanna: I see, so if people aren't told that they should be empowered and they don't care, then it would be hard to get anyone to take action.

Kalamu: That's one philosophy. But it's important to have sessions in the media training, where we talk about these issues, and not just about using equipment. We have to understand that what you all are doing is learning how to use this as a tool for social action, then you need to go out and teach other people. That's what education is all about.

As part of their mission to teach other students digital video through peer education, Newbian were responsible for training other SAC students, like the group from Abramson who collected interviews for *Rumours of War*. They also began a weekly media literacy project with a SAC class at Bell Middle School, which was continued with the media team that came behind them the following year, B.O. S. S. (Bright Outstanding Students Shining). The partnership with Bell was designed as a collaboration with a Feminist Theory student from Tulane, Laura Seminskie. Laura began working with Newbian after Jim and I met with a group professors who were a part of the Urban Village program for undergraduates. The instructors in the cross-disciplinary program contacted us because they wanted their students to have the opportunity to work in public high schools to fulfill their service learning requirements. As a group, we worked out the details and planned that students in the Urban Village would contribute to various literature and writing projects to be included in *Our Voice*, a SAC book, or the Douglass school newspaper.

Laura's professor, Molly Travis, attended the meeting but was not a part of the official Urban Village program. After listening to our plans, she asked if she might place

Laura with the SAC media team. Jim and I agreed, only if she were willing to build a meaningful collaborative relationship with the students. After discussing a few options, we felt that including Laura in a project to facilitate a critical discussion of media images with younger students would be a mutually beneficial project. Several planning sessions later, Laura and Newbian decided to teach digital video to the Bell SAC Language Arts class by helping them to create videos based on course texts. The experience of acting as the teachers for the younger students brought some unexpected lessons about dialectic methods of teaching, the importance of problem-solving, and steps necessary to develop a shared vision (Fasheh, 1995; Shor, 1992). Adriane talks about how she felt like a member of a learning community when teaching other young people what she had learned about media:

It was very exciting going to Bell, because we had these ideas of what we wanted to do, and what we wanted to come out of it. We asked ourselves, 'What did we want these kids to know? What did we want these kids to leave with?' And what did we want ourselves, as a group want to leave that experience with? We talked about it a lot and realized we wanted them to understand, to be more conscious individuals, conscious of what they allow to come in—be it television or radio, or whatever. Even what they are reading, and all types of images that surround them. We wanted them to think about what all of that means. 'Are they real images, or are they distorted? Who made those images?' And the fact they were younger definitely made a difference. Because once you reach a certain age, you tend to be more resistant to information that people are giving you. And we felt like, okay they are younger than us, they haven't hit high school yet, which tends to be the killer spiritually. We figured, hey, they're in 8th grade. The might be at a point where we could still try and get something in there.

She also reflects on what teaching taught them, as a group, about the purpose of education:

I think for us, it was the satisfaction of knowing that, sure *we* can do the work—we can do produce a socially conscious video or a commentary on some social

issue. But to be in a school, to be in the middle of it and just do it, hands on, person-to-person, that was a new experience for us that we hadn't had before. We knew it would be different than speaking through a piece of paper or a video or speaker. We wanted to be there with the people, talking to them and relating to them on a personal level. And people did it to me when I was young. I remember people coming in my classes and dropping the knowledge on me, or working with me. Those are the things that I retained, people that actually devoted a lot of time, not just coming in as one-time speakers who gave some lecture on something. But people who were there, and we were there every week so I felt like that was be purposeful.

As the work that students were doing became a part of larger activist collaborations, other community groups became committed to creating projects involving young people in participatory action and community learning. Soon the Newbian Production team was commissioned to film a series of community building events including 1) public lectures and classroom workshops given as part of the University of New Orleans' Life Writing Series with Le Ly Hayslip and Asha Bandele; 2) a jazz workshop conducted at McDonogh 35 by music legend Harold Batiste; 3) video essays on local historical figures and community activists that were included on *New Orleans UnMasked*, like visual artist Willie Birch; 4) documentation of a press conference on SAC held at John McDonogh High School, which highlighted the support of state Senator Irons for the program; and 5) Moving Stories Dance Theater, a benefit for local HIV/AIDS organizations.

Yet Kalamu never abandoned his emphasis on writing and telling powerful stories with digital technology. The first narrative piece Ashley, Towanna, and Adriane produced was based on a poem that Adriane wrote about rape, entitled "Did He Hear Me?" The poem was written the year before in Jim's Creative Writing class and was later

published in the SAC book *Murdering Addictions, Weaving Nests* (2000) where it caught Kalamu's eye:

I do not know if God was listening that day
 But I screamed as my wrists were being pinned to the floor
 Vision blurred by tears too stubborn to fall
 The moisture in my ears blocking the sound
 I writhed in pain as he forced his way into my sacred place
 My stare fixed on a daisy vase in the corner
 A petal fell in the floor as his vileness seeped into my body
 He moved quickly, killing my spirit
 With each thrust
 I was numb and felt nothing but the sweat that fell
 From his forehead onto my face and sizzled
 I looked into his eyes that were glossed with guilt and happiness
 He slowed, grunted with pleasure
 Pulled out violently
 I gasped for air

I do not know if God was listening that day
 But I do know that as my body lay limp
 I prayed for salvation

Adriane, who never suffered a rape herself, says though she did not originally envision it as video it was important to focus on how women survive these traumas. As the Newbian team discussed ways to depict the poem on film, they were encouraged by Kalamu not to show the act of violence or focus on the perpetrator as a source of titillation. Instead, they decided to show the protagonist healing by sharing her experiences with other women, and ended the video with a PSA on the Rape Crisis Center that operates in the New Orleans YWCA.

When the students asked if they could shoot their first video at my house, I was happy to provide a location that was within walking distance of the school, and that they could access during the day for as long as they needed it. None of us knew how quickly

the students would master the roles of videographer, director, producer, and sound editor. But after just one semester of a Media Internship led by Kalamu, their work included a 5-minute documentary piece on the SAC radio production project and the beginning of a 30-minute piece on the impact of the prison system on family life. The prison video grew out of the writing workshop and book *Locked Away and Lifted Up* (2001) and included interviews with local activists, writers, youth, and community members who have personal or familial experience with the prison system.

At the end of the summer of 2001, after the Newbian team graduated, I sat with Adriane and listened as she spoke eloquently about her work with SAC as individual and communal process:

Now I see that when people are in powerful positions—and just having a camera and access to a studio is a powerful position—you have a responsibility to use that for the betterment of somebody other than just yourself. In the case of that date rape piece that we did, obviously it wasn't done for esoteric reasons. Sure, it came out writing that I did, a writing that was just a personal expression of myself, but the piece overall was for the betterment of another group of people, a group that I don't even belong to. I have never been abused, but I feel some responsibility for some women that are abused. If they can't say something about it, if they don't have the strength to do it, then somebody needs to do it for them. That's the angle that I tend to work from on a lot of things.

When Kalamu travels domestically to speak, or is invited to do educational residencies abroad, he shows the growing library of SAC media work to university audiences, high school students, and writers in states from Utah and Wyoming to California and Florida. By the end of the 2001 school year, the SAC program expanded to include classes at McMain Magnet School, Walter Cohen High, and Woodson Middle School to reach its current 10-school scope. In each school, the funding for courses and

equipment come from various sources, but the Youth Media theme provides a structure for all classes to contribute to texts, radio, video, journalism, theater, or the Web site project that ties together all of the work done in Students at the Center classes.

As Mel King (1991) attests, these are the kinds of strategies that need to be included in a “framework for action” that deals honestly with the structural relationships in our society that shape our cities and neighborhoods. King describes the task as “struggle of land and a struggle for the mind,” as he says,

It is my contention that, if we win the struggle for the mind, then we will win the struggle of the land. So, we have to think first about where the struggles for the mind exist. Obviously we need to deal with issues of race and gender. These are what I call the fallout from the structural issues in this country.... We also need to understand all of the ways in which the media, education and other institutions have denied recognition of people who are black. Denied recognition in terms of their role in this country.... Failure to understand the fallout from the structure in which we live means that we will not be able to think, in the way we need to think, in order to frame the questions that need to be asked. (in Nyden and Wiewel, 1991, pp. 17-18)

Students at the Center framework is based on the connection between educational praxis and the social justice mission the program enmeshes, and the physical environment of place, with its residents’ perception of possibility. Too often in urban schools and the neighborhoods that surround them, structural forces politically disempower people. These structures are institutionalized in arrangements that culturally devalue their perspectives, and ultimately their identities (Giroux, 1991; Grossberg, 1993). It is within these contexts that acts of resistance to the inequality that exists in the cultural sphere of urban schooling can be extrapolated to a global enterprise to erase injustice (Ball, 1987; Blaise, 1992; Gilligan, 1993; Miron, 1996). Agency in its

varied forms is one way to pursue alternative visions for community by building coalitions and taking action to collectively serve mutual goals.

Transforming Your Lifeworld: Exercising Agency

In the keeping with this effort to connect education with social justice, students at the Center developed collaboration with Crescent City Peace Alliance (CCPA) by including students in a neighborhood-planning project. The partnership was formed to involve representatives from the neighborhood high school in a local memorial to Homer Plessy. Just two miles from Frederick Douglass High School, Plessy made his famous act of civil disobedience, which led to the historic “separate but equal” ruling in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896.⁸ Plessy’s refusal to ride in the Negro section of a Covington-bound train took place on the corner of Royal Street and Press Avenue, an unmarked site now owned by Norfolk Southern Railroad.

After long negotiations between CCPA and the railroad company, and with financial support from Dryades Savings and Liberty Bank, SAC was asked to train students to do research and write all the text for the memorial. The writing students are working with math classes to measure the site and help design the physical layout in collaboration with landscape architects and planning consultants. According to its organizational mission, CCPA was founded in 1995 on “the belief that peace and safety will be restored in the city of New Orleans by bringing diverse groups together.” For this reason the community residents that lead the organization see their role as resource

⁸ According to Hirsch & Logsdon (1992) this decision by the Supreme Court explicitly sanctioned segregation. In 1892 Plessy was arrested for an act of resistance to the laws of racial inequality. This event and his imprisonment is said to have been pivotal in the establishment of the Howard University School of Law in 1893.

mediators and organizers who build partnerships that preserve the community of memory and plan a community of hope (Baum, 1991, p. 282).

In 2001 CCPA also decided to use money from its federal Weed & Seed initiative to provide funding for SAC courses dedicated to themes relevant to the Plessy memorial project. With this financial support, Douglass High School created a course taught by former SAC student Erica DeQuir that is focused on writing about civil rights. The Weed & Seed grant award came to CCPA in 1999 as the second such Department of Justice designation site in New Orleans. By using student experience as the jumping off place, Erica's class situates African American history in a broader context of colonialism and contemporary social justice movements. At the same time, the Tulane School of Public Health partnered with a social studies course by developing a related class called "Understanding Violence and Making Peace."

To date the "Peace and Violence" class has produced one play about student experiences with violence in their own community and reprised a long-standing SAC partnership with theater artist Kathy Randels. Once again, she began by going to meet with a class once a week and asked to students talk about their own experiences in the community, and at Douglass High. Eventually, as they recounted true stories, Kathy noted that not a single student talked about instances of peace. Every story that they told was about violence they had personally experienced or witnessed in their neighborhood. After one student talked about seeing his best friend shot and killed in the public park near the school, other students started to connect their memories to the same place, St. Roch Park.⁹

⁹ The play, "Inhaling Brutality and Exhaling Peace," was also performed at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church across the street from St. Roch Playground. The community performance, was co-

The park is across from St. Roch Chapel, which was originally built in 1876 in thanksgiving for local residents who survived the New Orleans yellow fever epidemic of 1868 (Campenella, 1999). The historic structure and adjacent cemetery is a community landmark. When the park was constructed it was a center of activity, and often inhabited by neighborhood children who waited in line each summer to enter the public pool. All of the students knew of the park as a source of pleasant and painful memories. After working with Kathy for a semester, their stories were woven into a play that was first performed at a Youth & Community Development Conference at Clemson University in March 2002.

Jim, Kathy, Dan, and I drove to Clemson in a rented van and two cars with the class from Douglass, their teacher Sunni Paterson, and a SAC Civics teacher, Dorese Blackmon. Two students from Abramson High School also joined the group to perform a play about violent conflicts between rival schools and neighborhoods as a part of the conference. That play, based a story written in a SAC Creative Writing class, is entitled “One Shot: Man, Where Is From?” written by Erica Evans. Erica’s story was published in SAC chapbook, *Rumors of War, Visions of Violence* (2001) along with the writings of her classmates from Dan’s American History class. Her tale of turf battles in New Orleans between rival neighborhoods was included with other stories of “war,” and offers insight into the way community groups divide themselves into enemies and allies (Volkan, 1988) by repeating cycles of violence. In this excerpt from the end of the story, the main character reflects on her choices, and sends a message to others:

sponsored by Students at the Center, Douglass Senior High School, Crescent City Peace Alliance, and the Algiers/Bywater Weed and Seed. Each local performance is followed by a discussion of strategies for community organizing and improvement, and is led by students and other community leaders.

Well, they did give me a few years for shooting Candy, but everyone else wasn't my fault. So I have to go; it's time for lock down. Man, I've become what I tried not to become, another black person behind bars. Man, I got caught up in the system: another statistic.

These people who say black people will fight each other over wards, and men and women over drugs before they fight for justice, fight to keep hope alive, fight to keep our black kids in a good school. Maybe they are right. I've become a product of the system.

All it took was one shot. Now they tell me when I can eat, sleep, and even go to the bathroom. ALL THIS FROM ONE SHOT. Now my pain is deep everytime I utter the words, 'Where is you from?'

"I wrote the story last year just to tell about things that I have seen," Erica said as her feet dangled off the large professional stage in the Clemson auditorium. While she sat to answer questions after the performance, the audience of arts and education teachers were at rapt attention. Erica smiled confidently as she spoke about turning her story into a play with the help of her teacher Dan, and the guest artist who partnered with her class, Lloyd Martin.

I was invited to join them on stage as educators and scholars talked about the writing process and the value of community stories, and asked questions about the collaboration that brought the project together. I told them that I remembered meeting Erica nearly two years before at Abramson as an observer in Claudia Taylor's Creative Writing class. I was attending that class regularly, and had gotten to know the 5'2" junior with a broad smile and cornrows, which were always laid flat underneath a red bandana that matched her school uniform. One day Erica asked me to read her story after the bell rang. As I was remembering aloud, Lloyd jumped in and said that he first came across her work the same way. He recognized it as a story that she should share with her peers and

agreed to help if she wanted to put the story on stage. They found time between her job and the after-school basketball practice to work on the script and bring in her classmates as actors.

When asked how she and other students learn to make the leap from personal experiences to larger social issues, Erica replied, “Where I’m from all you have to do is ask anybody in a public school to tell a story of something they know about firsthand. The hard part is finding a way to get your ideas out in the open, because everybody my age has something to say if you listen.”

Susan Bryson from the Women’s Center agrees, and claims that philosophy helps her to see her work in a different light:

It’s an amazing honor and a privilege to go to these public schools, meet these young people and let them share their learning with us. I have also learned a lot about how to run this kind of a program in those institutions. It amazes me that Jim has to go outside the system to get support. A lot of the time the front office doesn’t even know what kind of work is being done in the SAC class; yet everyone in the community knows what it is. That’s really interesting to me.

Jim attributes the growth of SAC directly to the quality of work that students produce and share, not to changes made at the district level to support the program. When organizers, educators, and scholars see young people creating work that adds to a public discourse on education and community building, various sectors of local actors begin to coalesce around those successes.

As Stone (1999) argues, communities that invest in debating a diverse set of perceptions about the “education problem” must also bring various sectors together to leverage their shared interests and orientations in a process of “issue crystallization” (p.

243). In other words, without a means to close the dividing gaps among stakeholders, building new relationships that lead to strong coalitions for change will remain unattainable. To mobilize on behalf of a problem-solving effort a structure for building civic capacity is needed.

Human Agency at Work: Developing Capacity

The positive public response, and the students' desire to keep learning after the school year ended, motivated Kalamu to create the first Neo-Griot summer, six-week workshop in space provided by CCPA. During that session Erica DeQuir learned the video skills she now uses in her Black Studies classes at Frederick Douglass. At the end of that summer, Gabrielle Turner, who recently graduated and is a former member of the B.O.S.S video team, produced a major piece called the "The Dress."¹⁰ The video is based on a oral history essay she wrote about her grandmother, but she traces her interest in learning technical skills to her early writing work:

When I became a part of Students at the Center, it gave me something to do in the evenings. I started going to WWOZ on the weekends and I think it made me a well-rounded person. It's more than just a writing class—you get history, you get English. If it wasn't for the videos I do and the papers that I write, I would never have known all the stories I have found out about my family. Now people come up to me and ask for my help on things they want to film. Like just yesterday a lady saw my video at some public event and she asked me to do a video about her grandmother who was one the first black women to graduate from 35.

¹⁰ This video is based on several essays that Gabrielle wrote about her family members. The combination of imagery and interviews that she uses are an exploration of her grandmother's life and her father's upbringing in rural Louisiana. The template for the video came from an essay included in *Sankofa* (2001) entitled, "Lesson From Dad Part II: Cotton Pickin."

Gabrielle is a petite young woman with big brown eyes and soft voice. She is not one of the boisterous students, or the one who stands out in a crowd in the hallway.

During that conversation I asked her how she got into the first Students at the Center class that sparked her interest in writing. She replied:

My mom tells me I was blessed to be in this class, because I didn't sign up for it all. I didn't know Mr. Randels, or any of the other students that were in the class. Towanna told me about it the year before, but I never considered myself a writer. I had never done any community activities through school either. I remember when our class first went to the radio station I was like, 'What does this have to do with 35?' And when I got further along, I saw how it was connected, because the community wants to have something to do with the school. Kalamu explained it like we were building a fellowship between 35 and the community.

Later, when she began learning video production that summer, she says that she was further inspired to get involved by what she saw her peers doing during their 10-day participation in "Save a Million Lives AIDS Prevention Campaign" in Ada, Ghana.

When I interviewed her the beginning of her senior year she was more confident and outspoken than she was when we first met a year before. She was one of six McDonogh 35 SAC students that joined seven other New Orleans Public School students and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies to travel to Ada, to work with teachers and students from Ada Secondary School on media projects dealing with public health, family communication, and youth organizing issues.

Two weeks before the group left, I was asked to go as one of the adult chaperones on the trip assigned to work with the documentary team, while Jim worked with teen journalists, and the Institute staff helped groups of Ghanaian and New Orleans youth to develop radio and television spots to be aired in the Ghana national media.

After attending group discussions on AIDS and its impact on life in Africa and the United States, the 22 students from Ghana partnered with the New Orleans youth as they broke into small work groups in different areas of the Neko Tech Community Center.

The community center is a spacious modern building that stands out in the Ghanaian countryside. Most days it sits alone bathing in the African sun in an open field that separates it from the Secondary School by nearly half a mile. Every morning after breakfast, students attending that school from all over the country and parts of Western Africa would walk over in their neatly pressed uniforms to meet with students from New Orleans. In groups about the size of a SAC class, the young sat in circles and shared their ideas and interests in using various forms of media to educate their peers on HIV and AIDS.

The discussions drifted from comparisons of social taboos across cultures, including dating and relationships with their parents, to the influence of media and advertising on youth and access to health care for the poor. The New Orleans students chosen to go on the trip had to commit to a four-month intensive reading and research group in preparation for their journey overseas. Jim and the staff of IWES compiled public health materials on the AIDS pandemic in Africa, cultural and sociological analysis on African spiritual practices, fictional narratives by Ghanaian authors, and historical readings on colonialism.¹¹ Members of the group were experienced media producers from their work on *Our Voice*, *Teen Expression*, and SAC audio and video courses. As a physician and public health advocate committed to working with youth, Denese saw the students' skills as an important asset to compliment the efforts of the

¹¹ Students were assigned selections from *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, by Anthony Ephirim-Donkor (1997); *Changes: A Love Story*, by Ama Ata Aidoo (19991); and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, by Walter Rodney (1982).

Student National Medical Association—a group of African American medical students who were taking part in the delegation.

To provide an opportunity for another student from New Orleans to learn along with the local youth using media, the Institute sponsored an essay contest that would provide the winner with a paid trip to Ada. Eighteen-year-old Mary Jane Walsh, a student from an exclusive private school, the Academy of the Sacred Heart, won the spot and worked on the reporting team while in Ghana. Though she was from a radically different ethnic and socio-economic background, Mary Jane contends that people she met on the trip were much like her, and said, “America is a very individualized, ambition-based society, but when I was there I saw something different, where people seem genuinely trying to be working for the good of their community.”

As part of the documentary team, my role was to discuss ways that students could use video footage as part of their peer education mission. I was not skilled in the use of the camera and boom microphones to capture the best footage, and did not know how to edit video or to set up an exterior shot. That work was left to the Documentary Production Teams. Newbian shared their expertise with the young people from Ghana, who were using the equipment hands-on for the first time. However, the emphasis was not the laptop PCs and digital video equipment that SAC brought, but on the ways to think about combating HIV and AIDS in a youth-to-youth campaign. When we were not in workshop sessions, the documentary team would set out in a van to visit the sites where the medical students had set up clinics, trained health educators, and surveyed residents about HIV and AIDS. By the end of the summer, Newbian had done a short

documentary on their experience as media workers in Ghana, but still plan a longer piece to be completed in 2002.

The community as the campus

In an article about the trip that appeared in the New Orleans newspaper, Michael Chancley, a junior at McMain Magnet School who worked on the television team, commented that the HIV ambassadors had no problem talking openly about the disease with their New Orleans counterparts, “But they were shocked to see how we discussed safe sex and other issues with adults” (*Times Picayune*, September 27, 2001). When the New Orleans group returned, Kalamu saw a change in students that he had already worked with, one that matched the interest in SAC media work that was bubbling up from other places in the community. Kalamu knew first-hand how impressed adults were with the work students were doing because he showed the videos to the members of his writing workshop and to his colleagues everywhere he went. “They are so impressed when I tell them that teenagers are shooting, editing, and producing these pieces. They can hardly believe that students are learning these skills in New Orleans public schools,” Kalamu says.

But for community members familiar with the program, SAC is a means to work with schools in a nontraditional way. Janelle White, a colleague of Susan Bryson’s at the University of New Orleans, and Director of the Leanne Knot Violence Against Women Project,¹² saw SAC as a natural partner when a Tulane Medical School student suggested

¹² The Leanne Knot Violence Against Women Project is a consortium of Tulane University, Southern University at New Orleans, and the University of New Orleans. The program brochure describes it as “a coordinated and comprehensive response to the social problems of stalking, sexual assault, and relationship violence.” Through educational activities in each university community, the program, which is housed at the Tulane School of Social Work, works to change attitudes that contribute to violence against women “by building multicultural coalitions that challenge all forms of oppression—sexism, racism, class exploitation, heterosexism, anti-Semitism and ableism.”

that her program make a video about domestic violence. Susan knew of SAC from past projects, and both thought a new partnership could produce a powerful instructional tool for the consortium.

Susan and her colleague Pam Jenkins, a tenured professor of Sociology at the University of New Orleans and key advisor to the Leanne Knot Project, were also piloting a course in Women Studies and service learning that year. In an effort to continue their work with SAC, graduate students from their course worked in classes at six schools once a week for an entire semester. When asked how the graduate students felt about working in city schools as part of their class, Susan saw parallels between her work at the university and the work done by students in SAC classes:

Overwhelmingly, the graduate students have been shocked by the structure of the schools. In one school, they have a “lockdown” period when students are not allowed out of the classrooms. These kind of structural things shocked some of UNO students, but those that are alumni of these schools weren’t shocked at all. They feel like the students are treated like prisoners and they wonder what learning must be like in that environment. Our philosophy about women’s studies or feminist theory is to be aware of the interconnected nature of oppression. We are involved in many kinds of activities for social justice. We have an urban mission at this university, too. So given the nature of the Women’s Center and our urban and community mission, we need to show the campus how to work on all these fronts.

I did not know Janelle, but when she asked if I could set up a meeting with Jim to discuss the possibility of creating a violence prevention video, it made sense to me right away. Janelle talked about the need for culturally relevant tools that could be shown by the college students who were being trained as peer educators to go into in Sociology classes to talk about domestic violence. Mannish, the medical student from Tulane who

had suggested the video, also thought that it was important to have instructional materials that could work well with a young co-ed audience.

Soon after, Jim and Kalamu introduced the Newbian team to the network associated with the Department of Justice-funded consortium. At that meeting SAC accepted the commission to produce an original video that would be shown in college classrooms and community forums. By the end of the Neo-Griot summer workshop Ashley, Towanna, and Adriane had completed a 30-minute video based on a script written by Kalamu. The students did all the camera work, editing, and casting. Adriane and her real-life boyfriend, a former SAC student and college freshman Yonus Astroga, agreed to act as the lead characters.

The narrative follows a couple they turn to their elders to get advice on how to handle the problems in their relationship. The scenes are shot against the distinctive urban backdrop of New Orleans. The characters ride the ferry across the Mississippi River against the city skyline, sit on neighborhood stoops in the Treme community, and walk home from the bus stop on the edge of the French Quarter. The city itself was, in effect, a key character in the story. These public spheres and their culturally specific territories were used to help assign values and meaningful points of reference (Castells, 1983, p. 14). It was important for members of the consortium that the student audiences personally relate to the piece, so they could see themselves and their life experiences in the fictional account. We all felt that a sense of connection was important, because “Place is the fusion of space and experience, a space filled with meaning, is a source of identity” (Friedland, 1992, p. 14).

Equally important was the effort not to titillate the audience with violence. There is no image of physical abuse in the entire story, only the slightly different accounts of an incident told by the young man and young woman. “We did that purposely,” says Adriane. “If this is going to be used to spark discussion we thought we should leave a little gray area about what actually happened.” The final product includes statistics and information on domestic violence, performances by noted local poets and actors, and original music by Harold Batiste.

At the first public screening of *When Love Hurts* in September 2001, Kalamu spoke to a crowd of more than 50 social workers, university professors, college students, and community activists about the importance of doing this kind of work with public school students. As he stood before the crowd gathered at the YWCA, he stressed that the only reason he was speaking on behalf of the student production team was because they had all graduated and gone off to college. They had not even seen the final cut with music added and credits included. SAC students who became video-makers after the original Newbrian production crew, worked with the Leanne Knott partners to finalize various facilitator’s guides to be used when the video is shown in public schools, universities, and community-based organizations.

After watching the piece, community members inquired how they could get copies. During the discussion, Gail Glapion, then-president of the New Orleans School Board and Chairman of the Board for the YWCA, was among those to praise the work of students. Pam, a sociologist and advisor to the Leanne Knott project, also noted that the important messages of the video were made more powerful by the complex treatment of the issues. “I was nervous the first time I watched this,” she said as members of the

crowd nodded. “It was so believable, that I was afraid she was going to take him back at the end. Now I can watch and laugh when the boyfriend’s brother gives him that terrible advice about women. I couldn’t before, because it was so real, and I was fearing for her safety.” The video is currently being show on college campuses around the nation.

Kalamu believes training young people to produce their own media, by using sophisticated social critique and personal stories, has a profound effect on students and the larger community. Just before the students from Newbian left New Orleans for college, SAC had a retrospective video viewing at the Ashe Cultural Arts Center in Central City. Students talked about their work and what it meant to learn media skills in school. Later, when I asked Kalamu what impact he felt the youth media work was having as a community building strategy, he said,

It’s really putting it on the agenda, and on people’s minds, that there is a whole segment of our society that is completely overlooked. When people were watching Gabrielle’s piece, “The Dress,” the other night and her father is telling stories about how he grew up, you just know there were lots of people in that room that would never have the opportunity to really listen to Mr. Turner under normal circumstances. At the same time, I know that none of the Newbians were thinking about going into media before we started this program. Now all of them are in communications in college. Whether they will stay in it or not, just that fact alone is significant.

Sharing the Vision

At the July 30, 2001, Ashe screening, Ashley stood up in front of the crowd and talked about the doing all the camera work for *When Love Hurts*, and about piece she did completely on her own. Her solo production is a documentary about the local artist and activist Willie Birch, who she met for the first time when Kalamu took all of us to

Willie's art studio in the Bywater neighborhood. She told the audience how much she learned that day as we sat on the floor and listened to Willie talk about the importance of preserving culture through visual media. When she was finished, her partner Adriane commented it was the longest time she had ever heard her introspective friend speak publicly.

During the summer workshop, Ashley talked about the change she recognized in her self-image—that at one point she was self-confident, but leaving grammar school changed all of that. By the time she started high school at McDonogh 35, she said she was used to keeping quiet even after she learned to like expressing herself on paper. As she talked about her video project she called herself a filmmaker and described her interest in media as a way to reach younger kids and inspire them:

When we went to Bell Middle School to teach media literacy to younger kids, I really saw how it can be a new form of social activism. When I first heard about the media internship I was reading bell hooks book *Black Looks*. She talks about the theories on the power of representation and distortion. I saw the connection between that and what SAC media is about right away.

Those kind of testimonials from students, have spurred more community requests for Students at the Center to work on their projects. Gabrielle's mother, who runs a community center in mid-city community of Hollygrove, asked SAC to produce a documentary video on the positive things that are going there, rather than just the crime that gets reported on the evening news. Another request has come from Curtis Muhammed, a labor organizer who wants to produce a video on the struggle to unionize garment workers who make the school uniforms in New Orleans.

According to a veteran SAC student from Douglass High, Damien Theodore, these are the kind of assignments that make learning interesting, not just the trip he took to Ghana or his work as a reporter and co-editor for *Our Voice*. As one of the lead researchers on the Plessy memorial project he says, “once we understand what happened in our community, we can form strong bonds and make our neighborhood a better place.”¹³ Collecting real community stories led him to create with two other student his first video based on Towanna’s poem, “Down to the River of Dryades and Claiborne Avenues.” The piece was included in the *Rumours of War* video installation at the Contemporary Arts Center and gave Damien and his peers a chance to give people a different perspective on his school:

I have learned more within three years in the SAC program than I have learned from kindergarten to ninth grade. Basically I learned about giving back to the community. I remember I used to hate school, well maybe not hate, but I didn’t want to get involved in anything. So when I really started seeing how things were affecting me, that’s when I started to get more involved. And by me and a lot of other students doing that, Douglass has turned around for the better. You can’t brainwash somebody to what you want them to think, but sooner or later Douglass students are going to be recognized for what they are good for. I think Students at the Center has done a lot. If it keeps going this way, I see a future as the community gets more involved.

Building Community Power: Local Culture as the Agent of Change

The discursive practices that I have described follow the trajectory of SAC. These points along the program’s path reflect the growth and development of its partnerships and collaborative process. Each are intimately embedded in the social

¹³ This quote appears in a *Times Picayune* article, “Civil rights memorial planned” published on March 21, 2002, where SAC classes are described as a key part of the event to mark the 110th anniversary of Plessy’s train ride.

relations of power and ideology that program participants demonstrate. Marxist theorists might describe this evolution as an epistemological project that emphasizes ways to interrupt the unequal social order that educational institutions reproduce (Apple, 1993; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1970.) When representatives from Students at the Center are invited to speak publicly about their work, and students address a crowd of educators, scholars, or community members, adults are impressed with how well they express themselves. They are also surprised by the amount of research and critical thinking that these young people demonstrate.

In many the situations, one of the first questions that is posed is not about *why* students are involved in collaborations, but *how* the partnerships were arranged and sustained over time. People want to know how these students have been able to politicize their own culture and “build alternative meanings and practices within daily institutions” (Apple, 1993, p. 152). In essence, they want to know how SAC has been able to connect its work in schools with that of other progressive individuals and groups. Without it, there is little hope for making a difference at the structural level of inequality.

When I sat down with Jim at the beginning of 2002 and asked how he knew that a collaboration was successful, he told me over the course of the first five years of the program his definition has expanded in step with his teaching practice. He explains that partnerships that genuinely benefit teaching and learning are more than just bringing in guest speakers for one-time events:

I think it’s successful when you make linkages to what you are already doing as a class, and in some cases we’ve done that and in some cases we haven’t. It works differently in each instance and we certainly have our share of times where it

doesn't work as well as it could. An important measure of success is the work that students produce.

Though he acknowledges that like any other participatory process, collaborating at each step can be taxing, he believes that without it there could be no Students at the Center program. "Because we are using this SAC model of working with outside partners and other classes, we can open up the opportunity to do something really good. But new projects that don't have that connection, can become a failed vision," he claims.

I came to see that one way to access community support in urban schools is by incorporating it into the work of other educators, activists, and artists who are interested in grassroots activity. Students should be actively involved in discussions as part of broad-based coalitions, and encouraged to use their voices and to speak on their own behalf. It is also important for students be to exposed to different perspectives by seeing themselves as active members of a diverse community of learners that can challenge the status quo. In the case of SAC, students also have the opportunity to learn skills from community members that can be used for social action of their creation. But before students can act in the interests of a collective, the adults around them must set an example that redefines the public sphere.

My earliest work with SAC exposed me to this aspect of the program's community-building strategy. When I saw the way that SAC classes faltered if they lacked solid community connections or if teachers were unable to build partnerships with local activists, I realized the important role these factors played in changing the classroom dynamics. In order for the classroom to become an effective space for radical democracy, there is a need for "teachers of the body politics" in the urban school (Miron,

1996, p. 116). Students at the Center does not lay that burden solely at the feet of its teachers, instead the program relies on the community it serves to shape its political subjectivity. In the very beginning of my participatory work with SAC, I observed such a process, but it was some months later when I realized its significance.

Creating effective networks

Before I was invited to attend a Community Labor United (CLU) monthly breakfast forum, I had no deep connection with the labor movement or grassroots organizers in New Orleans. I had been living in the city for more than two years, but was unaware that this “organization of organizations” existed before my participatory research took me to Dillard University for a Saturday gathering. After working with SAC students and teachers for three months, I felt that I needed to attend as many meetings and public discussions as possible to understand the scope of the program. The evening before the Saturday forum, the Fred Hampton Youth Action Committee discussed their presentation for the meeting at their usual meeting place in the back of Community Book Center.

The February forum focused on the LEAP test, and garnered so much interest from different community-based groups in attendance that all involved wanted the dialogue to continue. This was not the first time the forums were able to mobilize social activist groups around important issues. Community Labor United began a few years before as a coalition to bring unity among labor leaders, community members, cultural workers, and groups working for justice through consensus organizing tactics.¹⁴ To

¹⁴ All CLU gatherings begin with a review of the history of the organization and communal reading of the seven “Organizational Principles of Unity” that it is based upon. The commitment “to ending the exploitation of oppressed peoples everywhere” is the first of seven principles that all participant organizations must accept to be active members of the CLU coalition. A cornerstone of these principles is

pursue this goal the CLU organizational statement on “decision making and culture” states:

All decisions are made through a consensus process—driven by dialogue, input, and involvement from all members. As a coalition, we are sensitive to the interests and concerns of constituent members; we take action only after discussion and agreement. CLU only endorses positions, actions, and policies, which reflect the will of its members as determined through a rigorous consensus process, normally requiring at least two forums.

After the first conversation on the LEAP, people realized that one public dialogue on the issues was not enough to exchange ideas and strategize future actions. CLU responded to the call for a second forum and proceeded with “the twin tasks of initiating constructive activity on the community’s behalf and cultivating a system to support that activity” (Ross and Gittell, 1998, p. 53).

As the members of Fred Hampton prepared, they discussed how their work was unique, yet connected to the other groups that were also asked to speak as part of the roundtable. Members from the School Board, Parents for Educational Justice, and the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO) were invited to share their views on school policies and reform initiatives. As young adults and teenagers, they felt their commitment to finding ways to get students actively involved in their learning could be enhanced by the support of other community groups.

The group also talked about ways to describe a School Residency project that they just began at John McDonogh High School. At the start of the spring semester, Fred Hampton volunteers put college-age community partners in classes with math, history, and English teachers. The group developed the plan and presented their written proposal

to the principal. Later, they talked to a group of teachers that is expressed interest in having seven young adults come to their classes to assist them for a full semester.

On Saturday morning by 9:15 the Kearney Hall Cafeteria Center at Dillard was full of people chatting in small groups before the forum began. Most of the faces were unfamiliar to me, but when the program began with introductions, I recognized many of the organizational affiliations that forum participants named. I soon discovered that the eclectic group that came together each month varied somewhat according to the topic of discussion, but often the same activist organizations came out to support issues of community concern. Public education was a hot-button issue for the entire city and everyone present seemed to want to contribute to a community action agenda on the topic. Participants spanned a wide range of political, cultural, and social groups, including Parent Advocates from the public school system, educators from Southern University of New Orleans, the Green Party of Louisiana, Estacion Libre, the Welfare Rights Organization, Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), Junebug Productions, United Students Against Sweatshops and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), among others.

“We need to work on more than one project or focus area in our communities,” Curtis Muhammed, one of the founding members of CLU told the crowd of educators, artists, scholars, activists, and students. “Working in isolation from one another breeds competition, and what we really need is to understand all aspects of oppression as interrelated. To build unity, we have a different culture—one that is open to all voices and all points of view,” Curtis said as he stressed the need to have concrete actions come out of the CLU forums.

When Brenda Mitchell, President of UTNO, spoke she talked about the dilemma facing her organization which is the largest union in the state of Louisiana. Though she leads a professional union, she talked about her work in connection to social justice movements and organizations that enlist the support of the community in their struggle for adequate resources. She also urged the group to demand public accountability by policy makers. Assata Olugbla, a member of Parents for Educational Justice and local prison activist, echoed that sentiment and pointed the finger at media reports that skewed the issues.¹⁵ She argued that debate over state testing was being manipulated in the same way that other civil rights issues were—by downplaying the politics of urban education to dampen the demand of parents, students, and teachers to have more power in the decision-making processes that led to policy.

“Our group began because we saw that there is no alignment between the curriculum and the assessment. Standardized tests are okay as a gauge of student performance, but by enforcing a retention policy on those who do not pass, the students become the only ones accountable for the failure of the educational system,” Assata said as she described her organization’s mission. Afterwards, the group shifted into smaller break-out discussions at our tables, then reconvened to share ideas and pose questions for next steps. In the end, three important strands of an activist framework were identified, all of which tied education firmly to community life: the need to attract good teachers and maintain quality instruction in the classroom, the need to understand the politics of education as a community-wide issue, and the need to use public education as a vehicle to transmit culture.

¹⁵ Students later interviewed Assata on her experience with prison issues as personal and social justice struggles. The interview was included in their documentary about the impact of the prison industrial complex on family and community life.

To pursue these aims, SAC teaches students that youth have the necessary energy and creativity to lead grassroots community building with their knowledge, their work, and their ideas. Over time I also saw that teachers need the same encouragement. Many people do not come to the classroom with experience in community organizing or social activism. Teachers and students can both learn these skills and take part in a reciprocal relationship of support in the process of making connections between school curricula and larger social issues.

When the CLU network saw the need to reach out to other ethnic communities, to build a wider organizational agenda for change, its members sat down with representatives from the Institute for Women and Ethnic Studies, Students at the Center, and a Latina outreach worker with the No AIDS taskforce. In devising strategies to work through the existing collaboratives, a forum was planned where participants could tell stories of *why* and *how* they build coalitions that fill the gaps in existing services.

The participants in CLU saw the need to put networks in place that help to facilitate the kind of projects that SAC built within its community of learners. Individual collaborations can produce good work, but webbing them together amplifies their power to bring about changes at the institutional level. The “participation hypothesis” (Verba, 1961) supports the philosophy that the action of small groups can lead to structural changes that enhance performance in organizations and change the culture of institutions:

The ability to build collaborative relationships is regarded as the basis for future community as well as organizational success....Significant changes in human behavior can be brought about rapidly only if the persons who are expected to change participate in deciding what the change shall be and how it shall be made. (Sanoff, 2000, pp. 32-34)

In an effort to help institutionalize this approach, SAC played an important role in the formation of the Louisiana Research for Community Empowerment (LaRICE). The call for this organization began in September of 1999 when participants in the CLU breakfast forums began talking about the need to conduct credible research and to stimulate action on the range of community issues that were being discussed within the collective. The forums, which were sponsored by the Dillard University School of Business and the Division of Social Sciences, kept circulating around topics of social, economic and environmental justice that scholars and community leaders wished to study. Research possibilities on subjects like the Louisiana tax structure, and the incidents of police brutality being reported in the *Times Picayune* were being bandied about each month. LaRICE was born to help facilitate studies on topics that its community of learners identified.

At that time there was no existing community-driven research initiative in place for CLU member scholars, grassroots organizations, labor unions, religious and cultural organizations, and educational institutions. Dillard fully supported the concept and agreed to provide in-kind support for LaRICE while it pulled together an interim board of volunteers from CLU attendees. By 2001, the organization was incorporated and had a mission, goals, and tentative objectives that grew out of the action research interests of the collective. The philosophy of a community research consortium also found its way into Dillard's university mission statement.

Jim and I sat on that Board of students, organizers, Orleans Parish school system staff, artists, and business consultants to help craft the LaRICE organizational structure before an Executive Director was selected. Pat Bryant served as the interim director and

gathered input from a range of stakeholders in the city and around the state on the kind of research needed. One of the repeated requests was for a Labor Studies Center that would be supported by university partnerships and coalitions of labor activist and unions around the country. In the long run LaRICE hope to house what it came to call “the labor college” at one of the universities in the New Orleans area. As Curtis said:

Since this is a history-making event that is pro-active we need to develop a one-page information sheet that we can circulate about what we are doing. It should contain details about how we are creating a progressive organization that working is to become self-sufficient, and will depend on the passion and consistent effort of the people to grow. The monetary awards will come if we develop the capacity to win research contracts, foundation grants and do our own fundraising and development. It’s time for this community to take our organizing to the next level. We need to continue to build collaborations with universities, but the people need to build a structure to do this research for ourselves.

By this time, SAC and its partners were talking about the fact that their work was larger than galvanizing the community to mobilize its resources for education or any political agenda. The network recognized that power and agency encompass two important characteristics of community, its culture and social reproduction such that “the demand for cultural change, rather than simply for political rights, would redefine the organizational forms and actions of the dominant culture” (Stoecker, 1994, p. 205). They also felt that they needed to document their process and study it formally to ensure that the “urban community-based social movement” (Castells, 1983) they hoped to build would clearly articulate the goals that they collectively shared.

In effect, they were developing strategies for an alternative vision of urban renewal, where true community-based development focused on the neighborhood as

much as on the community (Stoecker, 1994, p. 245). Randy Stoecker calls this kind of activity “the model of an alternative political opportunity structure” (p. 45). I argue that this vision of democracy cannot be achieved without making changes in urban schools.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: The Need for Embedded Social Action

The constructed learner embodies the desire to identify with the curriculum. Furthermore, for political projects of emancipation and empowerment, which promote inclusive representation of marginalized groups, to be educated means to be committed to social justice. No longer is the educated subject one who has learned, or one who learns; now the educated subjectivity must be understood in the context of pastoral modes of power. (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998; p. 58)

This study was conducted in the spirit of the program that it highlights, by using participatory methods of research and social dialogue. Community input was cultivated, facilitated, and purposely included at each step of the process. The premise of this methodology is that collaboration is essential to build an alternative vision for their future based on equity in the face of struggle. For this reason, the theoretical frameworks that I have drawn on to contextualize the community building work of SAC are wide-ranging. I have relied on understandings of culture, pedagogy and participatory research to investigate “the safe spaces that release the social imagination, and open new visions of community”(Weis and Fine, 2000, 292).

As such, part of my task has been to describe political structures and social discourse of SAC program using its lens of the student-focused activities and community collaborations. Looking critically at the specter of “differences” and their influences on the research process is a vital aspect the analysis of Students at the Center and its outcomes for the community in which it operates. Threaded through this investigation of

urban schooling and community building is an ongoing dialogue about the potential for social transformation catalyzed by “conscientization” (Freire, 1970). But in arguing for the possibilities of liberation for “the oppressed” I had to begin by understanding the lived experience and viewpoints of the community participants and their impact of their activities on community life.

For this reason it was essential to listen and learn from the ways that urban high school students use their backgrounds and neighborhood surroundings as arenas for education and action. It was equally important to consider the role of community partners from a wide range of organizations and perspectives, and allow them to explain their interest in working with SAC to achieve community goals. Through this process I came to understand the experience of students as they are introduced to material and challenged to make it meaningful and relevant to them as learners and citizens. In so doing I found that action and reflection were enjoined in a way that put the work of students, organizers, teachers, and community members to the test of its utility and potential for empowerment.

These themes served as the framework for synthesizing observations, probing assumptions, and presenting this research through the voices of the array of collaborators connected to Students at the Center. As they attempted to develop their communities from within, the issues of *collaboration*, *social justice*, *resources*, *organizing*, and *community improvement* were defined as the fundamental building blocks community development. Pragmatically, these concepts were not separated into discrete inputs and outcomes by SAC participants and used as a static measurement of success or failure. Instead, the short and long-range goals of Students at the Center were articulated as aims

that were pursued simultaneously for participant “self-education” (Keating, Krumholz, and Star, 1996, p.123).¹ This axiological stance is crucial when relying on the words of the participants to animate this story and illustrate the lessons that can be learned from this example of grassroots community building.

The vision of community building presented here is steeped in a normative view of ways to study and identify community development outcomes and fundamental processes. These issues have equal gravity for the policymakers who shape the lives of community members, and for the scholars, activists and participants who insist that equitable change must come from the bottom-up. Throughout this study I have made the local knowledge, learning, and participatory activities of the community members who define the work of SAC central to the research design and analysis. By adhering to a PAR process, the conceptual and methodological dimensions of participation, equity and social transformation “move neighborhood development to the level of community-building... based on a holistic approach that suggests all efforts must be integrated into a plan that has been developed by all the stakeholders in the neighborhood” (Krumholz and Star, in Keating, Krumholz and Star, 1996, p. 240).

Methodologically, PAR points to many of same approaches advocated by scholars of neighborhood organizing like Robert Fisher (1994) in *Let the People Decide*:

¹ In *Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods* (Keating, Krumholz and Star, eds. 1996) Jacqueline Leavitt questions the role of community planning processes in addressing the social problems and unrest following the riots in Los Angeles in 1992. Leavitt (p.122) offers a set of eight suggested community-planning principles that should be employed to meet the varied organizing, planning and project development needs of distressed neighborhoods that need to: 1) be inclusive and unifying to bring various interest groups together around common policies and goals; 2) be comprehensive, including social, physical and economic development; 3) promote ownership by the community of both the development process and products; 4) promote equity and parity in the distribution of public resources; 5) promote institution building/strengthening of community support systems, including family, church, neighborhood and educational institutions; 6) promote capacity building of underutilized human resources, including the transfer of knowledge and skills; 7) promote participation of all underutilized resources and people, and 8) promote self-determination and self-sufficiency of the community. Leavitt contends that these are the foundations of effective community planning and participation.

Strategies must focus on building organizational forms that bring people together—coalitions, alliances, networks and political parties.... Political education should help people develop the confidence necessary to rely on themselves, win the personal dignity and self-respect basic to participation, and challenge existing authority when necessary. It should not simply teach organization-building skills but must also reveal the roots of people's problems in the workings of the economic and political system (pp.225-227).

Fisher argues that such collaborative strategies can best emphasize questions *social justice* and *community improvement* by beginning with the perspectives and lived experience of those who are attempting to transform their surroundings:

The role of political education, which is an analysis which grows out of people's political experience, is to broaden people's perspective and to give them more information on which they can make more reasoned assessments of the conditions, problems and alternative solutions they face (pp. 225-228).

These are the tenets of the Students at the Center program, which is designed to create the kind of long-term political education described above. SAC argues that inner city schools are a logical place to begin this process in urban communities, because these learning environments provide the springboard for theoretical and practical steps to community development. Before drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of this approach, it must be reiterated that this model of community development assumes that urban education and activism should begin with theories of empowerment and be implemented as practices of liberation. For those engaged in the participatory practices of community building in New Orleans that I have examined here, planning and public policy has often had a devastating effect on public education neighborhood life. This

case demonstrates that residents can begin to free themselves of the circumstances that they did not wholly create through empowering education linked to activism. For those that support the notion of community building based on democratic ideals, Students at the Center offers a model that should be added to the universe of community development theory and practice.

Step 1: Building Community to Facilitate Empowerment

In conducting this study, finding the points of intersection between the internal structures of urban schools and the lives of students in their larger communities provided opportunities to include education in the discourse of community development. This link is an invaluable one for institutional programs and activist initiatives that seek to revitalize urban neighborhoods and build sustainable communities. The natural fit of this approach is acknowledged by the proliferation of school-community initiatives at the national, state and local levels that encourage businesses to “adopt” schools, non-profit organizations to see schools as community assets, and educational institutions to devise inventive mechanisms for community outreach. But without allowing the distressed neighborhoods to lead these initiatives by developing their own base of power, community-building efforts will never bring about lasting change.

Effective community development must come from the collaborative work of diverse coalitions, including public schools. No single entity or policy can reform public education or rebuild inner city neighborhoods. The model offered by the Students at the Center program points out that the best potential for equitable social change comes in

recognizing the symbiotic relationships between diverse stakeholders, and forming relationships across institutional lines. I contend that urban neighborhoods schools are the logical place to cultivate the empowering skills, capacity, and collaborative processes necessary for true community development.

Scholars of feminist theory in urban planning point to similar issues when they argue the need for validating multiple readings of lived experience and political action “that strive to formulate an alternative base from which to assess the structures of dominance with which knowledge is produced” (Liggett, 1996; in Campbell and Fainstein, 1996 p. 452). Like education, planning is both an academic discipline and professional practice, wherein calls for reform are enmeshed with critiques of institutionalized patriarchal relations.² As Susan Fainstein (1996) claims, there is a need for “critical readings of history, geography and science from the viewpoint of the oppressed to affirm different ways of knowing and modes of social intervention”(p. 456).

SAC does in the educational domain precisely what Fainstein argues that community planners should do in the public domain—it challenges the separation of knowledge from the experience of everyday life (McLaren, 1989; Mohanty, 1989; Apple, 1990; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990, Fine, 1992; Giroux, 1992). As Fainstein (1996) argues this is vital “to introduce a perspective that starts with concepts of communal relations and incommensurable values, that substitutes the development of consensus for exclusionary approaches, that protects the weak and recognizes the importance of sentiment” (p. 459).

² For a deconstruction of the gender bias in urban studies theory and research methodology see *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries and Visions of Urban Life* (Miranne and Young, 2000).

Students at the Center empowers students to use their voices and human agency to transform their schools and neighborhoods from within through research and action. As Michael Peter Smith (1992) points out, in order to fully describe the ways that everyday practices impact the urban landscape, research must develop a critical discourse on representation and agency by looking to people's experience in and perception of their material circumstances. This delicate balance is one that SAC achieves by situating particular stories and "micro-motives" within macro structures and larger social processes (Smith, 1992). It is my assertion that this approach expands the discourse of community development by offering new ways to cultivate intergenerational citizen participation. Stakeholder voices must be heard, their realities and challenges must be understood as historically constituted, and their solutions to community problems must be collectively forged. Therein lies the potential to act simultaneously in the institutional, community and methodological contexts necessary for empowering community development.

In the case of methodology, neither SAC partners nor I argue that the activities undertaken by students, teachers, and community members are universal expressions of history, culture and urban place. In fact, it would be imprudent to even suggest that there is a static culture to which all participants should subscribe in any diverse community-based coalition such as this one. Yet the power of the SAC collaborative initiatives came from the fact that they drew on community life and individual student experience, "where social spaces intersect and emergent social subjects interpret and deal with their conditions of existence" (Smith, p. 524). As many theorists of progressive education attest:

There is a need for a discourse of ruptures, shifts, flows and unsettlement, one that functions less as politics of transgression than as a part of a concerted effort to construct a broader vision of political commitment and democratic struggle.... Educators can address this issue by emphasizing the importance of radical democracy as a political, social and ethical referent for rethinking how citizens can be educated to deal with a world made up of different, multiple and fractured public cultures (Giroux, et al.,1996, p. 53).

Students at the Center offers an example of this kind of democracy and social action, one that I contend is valuable and necessary to building a shared vision of possibility. For SAC, that vision rests on the building of community through social learning, collaboration and political action. These dimensions of empowerment are necessary if citizens are to collectively problematize urban conditions of inequity and develop strategies for political action that can affect policy change.

Step 2: Connecting Neighborhoods and Schools by Creating Strategies for Action

Setting realistic goals for local coalitions involved in various forms of grassroots organizing and neighborhood planning is essential for sustainable community development. A review of the literature on urban development strategies and local initiatives shows a history of sporadic success in community-driven revitalization efforts in urban areas (Peterman, 2000). Neighborhood programs to mobilize residents are met with distinct structural challenges as they try to build citizen power within the limits of existing institutional structures. Changing current practices “involve reshaping the frames of reference in which issues are discussed and decisions are taken” (Forester, 1996; Schneecloth and Shibley, 1995; in Healey, 1997, p. 244). But as inner cities

continue to suffer disinvestment and the intensifying ghettoization of minorities and the poor (Hirsch, 1983; Jackson, 1985; Massey and Denton, 1993) the possibilities for empowerment are often questioned.

When investigating the conditions of the inner city and its communities it is impossible to ignore the fragmentation of social supports in the public sphere of urban neighborhoods. To understand the challenges of grassroots community building it is important to ask theoretical questions, such as: Is empowerment a process that happens within the individual, or does it come when acting as a part of a collective? Can empowerment be taught or given to others? And what is the relationship between empowerment of the individual and the distribution of power in society?

These are fundamental issues for researchers, participants in social justice coalitions, and neighborhood organizations that contest top-down processes. These processes take place in city planning practices and public education policies that shape urban communities economically, socially and physically, and are often spaces of conflict rather than community-wide collaboration among diverse groups of stakeholders. Empowering community development cannot be achieved without considering the multitude of interest groups and their varied priorities (Stone, 2001). But as Patsy Healey (1997) states,

Effective institutional processes for collaboration must build consensus not only around what problems are, but about strategies and directions. Strategies provide simplifying concepts. They organize thinking about issues. They indicate what are priorities and why. They provide points of reference which people call upon in certain situations. In this way, they have the capacity to frame social relations over which they have influence, to become “structures” to carry power (p. 244).

Public education and its power structure are political issues that have captured the collective imagination of American society and moved to the center of our public consciousness. Urban areas with the most pressing need for assistance to provide quality schooling are also the neighborhoods with the most entrenched economic and social distress. The “crisis” of urban education has become inseparable from the perceived failure of inner cities crumbling under decades of protracted poverty and suburban flight.

The struggle to address the problems in urban education has spawned a myriad of solutions and political arguments over viable strategies and directions. Some emphasize the need to teach children more, while others stress the need increase parental involvement, empower teachers to manage their schools, or abandon the traditional public education structure and provide free market school options for inner city families. Each of these perspectives articulates a strategy that has entered the debate on the problems facing city schools, yet these solutions are framed without considering the best method to make a greater social investment in youth. None of these approaches will bring about democratic education and empowerment because they are conceived as isolated institutional changes, not as a means to build community or empower students.

Creating strategies for action in urban schools and neighborhoods must begin by challenging exclusionary decision-making in public education and other policies that affect the quality of life in inner city communities. For these citizens the stakes are high. The very vitality of their neighborhoods and prospects for the future are at issue. Scholars looking at the human and societal implications of this struggle define “empowerment” in various ways. Those framing theories of power in the context of a social movement theory suggest:

Empowerment is the manifestation of social power at the individual, organizational and community levels of analysis (Reitzes and Reitzes, 1987; in Speer and Hughey, 1995, p. 730).

Or in the context of the community organizing methodology:

Empowerment is achieved as individuals organize themselves into a strong group that applies pressure and becomes recognized as a force in the community. (Bratt, 1991, p. 174)³

Early theories of citizen participation were developed to articulate a process for citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). Today that construct has expanded to include the language of community building, where the trend is to speak of collaborative involvement that is community-driven (Kinglsey, McNeely and Gibson, 1997). A growing body of literature on education reform has similar leanings toward the importance of coalitions and partnerships that cross institutional lines. It is not my intention to reduce the meaning of empowerment to a conceptual abstraction. Justice and democracy can certainly be theorized, but in urban communities these ideals are the grounds upon which to wage a battle for fair treatment and to envision the social reconstruction of the city (Anyon 1997; Stone, 2001). Addressing the problems in urban schools must come along with strategies for addressing the environment in which public schools are embedded. With that charge the political aims of empowerment become one aspect of a larger project of inclusion and representation that require collective action:

Empowerment is achieved only through organization; an organization is built on the strength of relationships among its members; and relationships are developed

³ For a more in depth analysis of the meanings and manifestations of empowerment see: "Community Organizing: An Ecological Route to Empowerment and Power," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23:5, 1995; or Reitzes and Reitzes (1987), *The Alinsky Legacy Alive and Kicking* (JAI press).

as individuals act together and reflect on that action (Speer and Hughey, 1995, p. 735).

This study of the Students at the Center program exemplifies the potential for making connections between neighborhoods and schools as source for community-building activity. Organizing people and spearheading partnerships are fundamental to the SAC method of teaching and learning *with* a community. When creating strategies for community action, political practice that highlights new arenas for community collaboration within existing institutions can provide a strong base for building individual and collective empowerment. Changing urban education in a way that builds community can only be achieved by changing the distribution of power in schools and the neighborhoods that they serve. Enacting such changes will only come through the collective action of diverse community groups that are able to mobilize to solve problems that they identify. Urban schools and urban neighborhoods are natural allies with common assets—unique institutional strengths, community members of all ages, backgrounds and experiences, and the potential to use these assets to build collective interest in community change.

John Friedmann (1987) describes this process in the lexicon of urban planning by using the metaphor “social learning,” wherein the community actors and activist learners are assumed to be one in the same (p. 185). By defining social learning as a method of “continuously forming and reforming task-oriented action groups that act as temporary social systems,” Friedmann (p. 186) points to the promise and the problems of community-self help and self-reliance. He argues that solutions to urban problems must fundamentally change the existing relations of power. What Friedmann prescribes is what

Students at the Center teaches, ways to challenge conditions of marginalization and disenfranchisement. As Friedmann (1987) notes,

A community must not only acquire a critical consciousness of its own condition of oppression, but also learn to engage in direct action to negotiate, and translate its actions into realizable, effective programs for change (p. 302).

These are the conditions necessary for challenging powerlessness and exploitation in all aspects of society. It is this emphasis on developing a transformative practice for education and empowerment that makes Students at the Center, and its vision, theory, and strategy of Embedded Social Action, a tool for civic mobilization. This strategy offers new possibilities for community development and public education by marrying their activities.

Step 3: Developing Coalitions That Cultivate New Leaders

In 2001, Students at the Center was one of over a dozen community groups and school organizations that joined forces to write a successful grant to the Department of Education for 21st Century Community Learning Centers.⁴ The request for proposals required that all applications be officially submitted on behalf of an entire school system. After applying unsuccessfully the previous year, SAC was invited to be part of a new coalition of community-based organizations, school system personnel, business partners,

⁴ The 21st Century Community Learning Center grant is issued by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

artists, and neighborhood development groups to develop the three-year plan that was eventually funded for \$2.3 million.⁵

During months of community planning meetings the possibilities for the grant were debated. All agreed that district schools should serve as the physical and conceptual space for community learning. Physically, the schools were the largest and most appropriately equipped for interdisciplinary study. Conceptually, though beleaguered, the schools were still central to neighborhood life and community consciousness. By the time Roslyn Smith, Director of External Grants and Professional Development for the school system, joined the collective, Students at the Center and the local faction of the national organization The Algebra Project had been selected to create the academic foundation for the proposal. Roslyn, a former elementary school principal, was newly promoted and moved into the Central Office. She supported the community-led initiative because of her philosophy on educational practice and the role of the neighborhood in school-community relations.

“I am willing to be a seat at the table,” she said as she volunteered to do research at the district level that would be required for the grant application. She knew that if the Community Learning Center proposal was funded it would be a momentous occasion for the New Orleans Public School system. Though encouraged by the cross-section of local institutions working on the project, Roslyn warned against haphazardly merging diverse

⁵ Two Community Development Corporations (CDCs) were a part of the original planning process of the coalition. Though the educational focus of the collaboration was outside of the tradition scope of services of the CDCs, their experience in neighborhood revitalization efforts was considered valuable by the coalition. In recent years, CDCs in New Orleans have come under fire for a lack of comprehensive vision and a city culture that “makes progress difficult on community development projects” (Ross and Gittel, 1998, p. 172). This assessment of the local context overlooks the broad range of community building efforts and participatory processes for rebuilding neighborhoods. It is my argument that the most promising models for collaborative problem solving in New Orleans, as in all urban areas, must expand the vision of community development to include a wide array of community resources.

interests to deliver the proposed services. She stressed the need to respect the distinct cultures and existing resources of different neighborhoods by creating several centers rather consolidating resources into a single location simply for administrative purposes. To this end, the grant proposed to develop three “Community Learning Centers” in district schools serving different communities.⁶

Roslyn knew the importance of planting seeds in localized areas from her years as a school principal and said, “This grant has the potential to create a web of education and arts resources in underserved communities. To show sincere collaboration, we need to work with the various communities groups that are already there.” When the group began to talk about themes that should be used in various elements of the grant, Jim and I chimed in on the Evaluation and Assessment portion of the proposal. SAC was already working on alternative activities to get high school students to find the motivation for learning beyond passing standardized tests and meeting individual goals. We raised the issue of creating a different form of educational accountability with the grant, one that highlights community needs and develops deep collaborations through education programs. Roslyn agreed that the Orleans Parish proposal, later named Urbanheart, should draw on community resources. She said,

If we have three centers, they should act as hubs that are open to other groups that want to join the coalition we are creating. This is a really unique opportunity for the city, not just the school district. We can create authentic centers of learning in the neighborhoods so that the role of the school building is no longer K through 12 instruction alone, but instead a resource for an entire community.

⁶ The Learning Center locations were chosen after looking at Census data and City Planning maps, and the 1998 New Orleans Empowerment Zone Application submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Statistical resources were used to determine areas of greatest need, and a basic SWOT analysis was used to pinpoint areas with considerable community resources, and existing Students at the Center collaborations.

After the proposal was funded, a Community Advisory Board was created with various committees dedicated to development, community relations, finance, and other governance issues. Members of the grant-writing team serving on the Board knew the importance of an action research process for community problem-solving. They wanted to create a space for the Urbanheart program to strategically take part in local and state policy discussions about the issues facing educators in the district. They saw the value in positioning the program as a model of community building that operates through the institutional structures of public education. I was asked to help the group develop a framework for negotiating the relationship between the Learning Centers, the school system, community-based organizations, city agencies, and state representatives that would expand the reach of the coalition. My input was primarily conceptual, but my contributions as a researcher were used to fill a need that participants identified.

Urbanheart began its first year with after-school programs at Frederick Douglass, John McDonogh, and George Washington Carver High Schools. At each site teachers, community councils, and students collaborate on a visioning process and implement the grant by developing SAC courses according to neighborhood needs and issues. The grant funds academic classes and provides in-school training for high school students. These students later serve as staff members in the Community Learning Centers. With the help of teachers and a site coordinator, these high school students tutor younger children from feeder elementary schools and create community-based education and cultural programs. To be paid as instructors, the students have to be enrolled in SAC or Algebra Project elective courses, and be selected by the neighborhood site team.

In the second and third years, Urbanheart is set to expand into additional senior high school sites, and provide funding for SAC courses that continue its model collective learning and community development. Theoretically, these processes are similar in Community Learning Center site, yet each neighborhood must build on its unique strengths and challenges as the basis for the Students at the Center model for organizing, and community-driven programs. The collaborative projects are defined by their site teams of teachers, students, and community-based organizations, and are linked to the larger Urbanheart network of community resources.

For example, in the first year at Douglass High School the Learning Center constructed its plan around the existing collaborations that have made SAC a strong community presence and mobilizing force for diverse partners. There, the site team developed a matrix of topics, skills, thematic connections, and potential partners with Students at the Center featured prominently in its implementation. This approach was not conceived as a recipe for instant social transformation, but in the words of John Dewey (1963) “Organized social planning...is now the sole method of social action by which liberalism can realize its professed claims. Such planning demands in turn a new conception and logic of freed intelligence as a social force” (pp. 54-55).

In order to implement strategies for action that build community, new institutional commitments must be created to focus collaborative participation on the long-range task of growing new leadership. Activist education is an important component of social learning and community building; it is also imperative for students in inner city schools. Community development efforts that do not include schools and young people in strategies to revitalize urban neighborhoods will be ill fated if they do not consider who

will carry on the work in the future. To make community development efforts sustainable over time, urban youth must be taught how and why to engage in social change efforts, and they must be treated as meaningful contributors to policy discussions, community discourse and political movements. Students at the Center is based on this philosophy.

Step 4: Creating a Community of Learners to Build a Movement for Change

Pedagogy alone will not change the politics of community that constrain urban schools. But linking public education to the material conditions of city life can begin a communication process to identify shared goals and ideals among citizens and institutional leaders (Haymes, 1993). Throughout this study I have given numerous examples of the work of SAC students, teachers, and partners as they consciously join a politics of location with a politics of voice. Through neighborhood projects, community-based research and writing, and public presentations of youth media, SAC coalitions take action to improve their urban environment. They also change the nature of schooling by offering a different model of school-community partnerships. These activities are a form of community planning that involves “diverse ways of knowing and being, and which have the capacity to reflect on, and call attention to, what lies behind the ‘politics of interests’ and the politics of voice” (Healey, 1997, p. 244).

The stories recounted here are a selective representation of the scope and history of the Students at the Center program. Case evidence that focused on the efforts to link the social and cultural aspects of learning to the physical environment and student lives in and outside of school was selected in accordance with the research interests and issues of

the study participants. As an example, the Urbanheart coalition offers an example of social activism that is deeply embedded in pragmatic practices that provide a resource of social and intellectual capital (Innes, et al., 1994). Its strategy requires mobilizing the institutional resources of education to deconstruct the unjust spatial, economic, and political conditions of its community by challenging the power structure in public schools (Smith and Wexler, 1995, p. 182). This is no small accomplishment for a neighborhood-level grassroots education program. Scholars and grant makers around the country have asked how SAC was able to earn nearly \$850,000 in external funding by the summer of 2000. Since then, The Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College, Write to Change at Clemson University, and the League of Professional Schools from the University of Georgia have all asked students and teachers to share their philosophy and techniques ideas with other educators.

As a part of their commitment to community empowerment SAC participants share their stories of community-building partnerships social action. Students and community partners contend that part of their charge is to assist other educators and activists find ways to improve their communities by working collaboratively. Often informal presentations at public meetings have led to invitations for SAC collaborators to take part in deeper conversations about the program's methodology for participatory community change. Many inquires have come from college professors, school administrators, and individual teachers asking how they might replicate Students at the Center in their classrooms, neighborhoods, or school systems.

One of the most powerful findings of this study, is that the key to developing the sustainable projects that blend education with community building is building skills in

small groups of students that prepare them to participate in wider circles of collaboration and social action. Over the course of this study SAC students and community partners were called on to contribute to local causes ranging from the Living Wage campaign to the People's Agenda for Cultural Equity. In time, requests to systematically share findings and lessons on the program as a methodology for community building led partners from a national network of scholars to suggest that SAC dedicate some of its research focus to examining its own practice more closely.

In 2002 Students at the Center received a two-year Teacher Practitioner Grant from the Spencer Foundation. The award was dedicated specifically to teachers interested in examining their own teaching practice and adding an “insider view of education” to the scholarly discourse. As a partner to SAC, I helped to apply traditional research language on ethnography, data collection and analysis, and processes for assessment to the proposal. By initiating research on its own of practice community collaboration, the cycle of PAR began to come full circle. The work of creating space for collaborative dialogue on reflection and action was replicating itself, and turning inward to look at the program's internal logic and strategies.

Jim and I discussed the grant application at length. We talked about the need for long-term research that can examine the ways that teachers, students, and community members build collaborations that are grounded in the school activities. Integrating the community into classroom practice is a simple concept, but we agreed that it is one that rarely garners institutional support, particularly in urban settings. The story is an important one to tell. As we discussed possibilities with community partners, the primary research question that resulted was: How can collaborations with community members

enhance teaching practices and extend the context of student learning beyond the walls of the classroom?

Designing a research study on the practice of teaching with a SAC model proved challenging at first. It required reflection on the goals of the program and an honest assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. From a pedagogic standpoint, the philosophy of SAC begins with the assumption that meaningful classroom and community partnerships are useful for teachers, students and the community at large. From a community development standpoint, the political argument is that these practices should be facilitated and encouraged in strategies for public education and neighborhood development.

Jim felt that the grant had to reflect the program's commitment to collaboration by including members of local organizations like CLU, LaRICE, the SAC schools' Parent Teacher Student Associations, and Community United to Reform Education in the assessment plan. SAC planned a series of public forums as part of the preliminary discussion and interpretation of research findings. The idea was to use this investigation to support empowering education and neighborhood initiatives, and to help create a community of learners that could benefit from the research findings.

After SAC received the grant, I attended a regional grantees gathering in Atlanta as a SAC partner. Everyone listened and many people took notes while experienced teacher researchers stressed the necessity of recognizing the power of context when doing research in their own classrooms. The attendees were there to learn research techniques, to think collectively about how to look for patterns in the data, and to critically

problematize their observations. They were also there to take these skills back to their schools and communities.

Joyce King, now the Provost of Spelman College was at that meeting representing the five-city study that she was advising. As a scholar who has written extensively on culture-centered knowledge as means of curricula transformation and social action, she urged the group to think about who their research would benefit and how it could be useful in the communities where it was being undertaken. The discussion then turned to the need to have rigorous research conducted by teachers included in the body of scholarship that influences education policy.

The insights and experiences of teachers are needed to spearhead a movement to reform urban schools, just as the cooperative action of diverse groups is needed to build a movement for equitable social change in urban communities. Bridging these domains in a community learning process will be fundamental to social justice movements in the twenty-first century. By applying an analysis of the Marginalizing, Invisibilizing, Expanding and Deciphering forms of knowledge (King, 1995) to the discourse of community development, policies and practices that disempower citizens can be identified and collectively challenged.

Step 5: Mobilizing Community Resources to Challenge Social Injustice

To build an alternative vision of community that is radically egalitarian, the multiple domains of culture, politics, and social life must be recast into a cohesive vision of planning for community equity (Krumholz, 1990). When speaking from his own

experience in starting Students at the Center, Jim emphasizes that his role as teacher led him to seek out collaborations with others struggling for justice. He firmly believes that the conditions in public schools can motivate other teachers to begin working democratically with students in the daily activities of classroom practice:

It all grows directly out of the teaching. I didn't start it as someone who was working in the Union, and active in Community Labor United, or Crescent City Peace Alliance, or even Community Book Center. All of those connections came from either the way I was teaching my class or the way I envisioned teaching my class. I think for years there have been school-community partnerships, and from my perspective they have usually been really shallow. They have arisen from the community partner, to benefit the community partner, to further the community partner's agenda. And there is some validity to that, but it usually hasn't been a true collaboration. If it's a university, the university comes in with something they want to do and the teachers have just kind of been blindly led into it.

In addition Jim stresses that collaborations are shaped by one's vision of what is possible:

It's important to tell the story of what it means to start from a school, and get people's stories about how they came to teaching, and ask what are their other interests and pursuits. I think that's a big part of it, and different people have different stories. It's important to begin to understand how this work can emerge from the school, and more specifically from the academic setting of the classroom.

When Jim conducted a workshop on ways for teachers to improve student writing at the beginning of the 2001-2002 school year, he used a similar framework to talk about the innovative use of media in the classroom. He emphasized the need for real-world situations and assignments to spark student interest and reinforce academic skills. Participants in the workshop watched short videos and listened to radio commentaries written and produced by students. Later they discussed the need to build an audience for

student writings to use oral histories to teach basic language skills and research community issues.

Afterwards, teachers were introduced to the tools necessary to bring video and audio production to their classrooms, including the resources and vision that SAC has developed to make media initiatives work. By stressing the need to organize and create assignments that have real purpose and audience, the group began to think of classroom work as a way to call upon student experiences. This led to discussions on how to link student identities and cultural production into community action projects. Jim gave examples of in-class journaling where teachers write with students about their lived experience and after school use those pieces in Story Circles built on democratic processes for intergenerational exchange and collective visioning. In the end, he told the group that the short presentation was a preview of a 2002 summer workshop in which teachers could explore these strategies, while using media to develop literacy and communication skills.

Within weeks, more than 200 teachers signed up for forty available spaces in a four-week media and writing course. The teachers who applied were from 16 schools and academic disciplines as wide-ranging as mathematics, science, language arts, history, health, and English. The overwhelming response came as a surprise to most of the school district's Teaching and Learning Task Force for Professional Development. But for Gail Audricht, an administrator in the Title I Office, it came as no shock. Two years before she attended a Bread Loaf School of English conference in Vermont with Jim and I. Two other SAC partners also attended, teacher Joyce Chapital, and Joyce Hawthorne, a vice principal who contributed significantly to the Urbanheart proposal.

On the trip to Vermont Gail listened as members of the SAC network spoke on various nationwide panels about activist education and pedagogies for community building. Upon returning to New Orleans, she convinced her superiors to partner with SAC to provide writing classes in Title I Learning Academy schools. After ensuring that curricula met with the state mandated academic benchmarks in social studies and language arts, Title I approved an investment of \$18,000 per site for the SAC program in two district middle schools and matching funds were provided by the school sites.

At the end of the school year, a proposal for professional development training was created by SAC and the Title I office. To do it well, both agreed that the budget needed to cover the cost of necessary digital video hardware, salaries for a team of media consultants, and reference texts, including the SAC publication *Sankofa*.⁷ The young women from Newbian, now rising sophomores in college, returned and worked with new SAC graduates to be workshop leaders and paid staff for the four-week program. They facilitated small group writing and media sessions for teachers and talked about their learning experience in Students at the Center classes.

As a long time partner of SAC, Bread Loaf co-sponsored the project and sent a graduate of their Master's program, a teacher from Mississippi, to work in-residence with educators in New Orleans. Her role was to introduce Orleans Parish teachers to an online community where they posted their writings and reflections for feedback from other educators and scholars around the country.⁸ Kalamu advised teachers as a digital

⁷ Other reference material for the summer workshop covered academic subjects like critical writing, African American literature; black youth culture; student produced essays; the *Our Voice* newspaper, and SAC video, audio, and theater productions.

⁸ The workshop participants became part of a national Teacher Network that links all of Bread Loaf campuses in Vermont, Arizona, New Mexico, Cambridge, and Alaska. The connection takes place in large part via BreadNet, an online community that brings urban and rural teachers and their classrooms together in collaborative literacy and writing projects. As one teacher, Rosie Roppel says in *Writing to Make a*

videographer and writing resource, and Jim and I worked with workshop participants interested in developing partnerships amongst themselves and in the larger network of collaborations in which SAC is engaged. By the end of the workshop, participants produced their own videos, web site designs and writing portfolios to be used as instructional materials for the coming academic year. On the final day, guests from the school system and Orleans Parish school board were invited to see the collaborative work of teachers and their student facilitators.

This culmination marked a breakthrough for the Students at the Center program and the New Orleans Public School system. For the first time since its creation, SAC received from the district notable financial support that did not require matching funds from individual schools. Never before had the school system directly invested in SAC or in training individual teachers to collaborate across schools and across disciplines using multimedia dialogues for community-focused activities. The possibilities that these efforts demonstrated are, in the words of Freire (1994), “a future to be created, built politically, aesthetically, and ethically” (p. 91). As the guests left the reception room where groups of teachers and their student leaders gathered for the final presentation and luncheon, a senior member of the Title I office embraced Gail as we talked about the outcome of the workshop. She turned to me and said:

We are so proud of the work that Gail has done. She is truly the vision in our department. Next year we hope more teachers will have this opportunity to learn from the students. If even a fraction of the teachers in this workshop use these skills to do similar projects in their own classrooms, we will have had a significant impact on our schools. This is one of the best ways to get teachers excited that I have seen in a long time.

Difference, “The outstanding thing about this system is its ability to create new communities of learners” (Benson and Christian, 2001, p. 109).

This story is a fitting example of the process of the SAC program and its implications for community building. The preceding steps began with the theory of empowerment and moved through the strategies, leadership, community expansion and finally mobilization stages of this model of community development. Clearly these accomplishments are incremental, but community participants consistently affirm that they make meaningful contributions to possibilities for action and grassroots collaboration. Though Students at the Center has shown signs for being embraced by the institutional structure of public schools, issues is funding and policy change will long term battles. Community programs and educational initiatives take money to initiate and they take people power, innovation and community support to sustain.

Students at the Center would never have been more than a good idea if a small group with broad vision of community development, and an expansive view of the appropriate uses of Community Reinvestment Act funds, did not see the connection between the schools in New Orleans and the city's future prospects for development and revitalization. Without students and teachers who were willing to seek nontraditional sources of funding, and who insisted that they need to be included in the building of community at both the invisible level and visible levels, the banks philanthropic organizations, community groups, corporate partners and universities that now partner with SAC may have never formed a working coalition.

Schools are universal community institutions and education is one of the most salient issues on the public agenda. For this reason, cross-sector coalitions to educate youth for action and civic leadership are uniquely situated to play a key role developing

communities both physically and culturally through Embedded Social Action. This coordination of resources will be more necessary as federal funding devolves, social segregation intensifies, and economic disparities widen in the age of globalization. In urban schools and communities new techniques are needed to bring people together to work in collective communities of interest. In order to link the call for social transformation in urban neighborhoods with call to improve urban education, a few points must be made about the current debates that are dominating our national discussion on school reform.

Embedded Social Action and the Issue of Scale

It is often implied that schools are faring poorly because there is a dearth of quality teachers. When this criticism is levied at public schools, teachers are usually blamed for failing to prepare students to pass state testing requirements. The threat of disciplinary action is then imposed on teachers to mandate their adherence to the universal curricula standards. This supports a system of individual consequence and accountability for the state of the entire system of education. Ironically, programs like Students at the Center are often criticized for small-scale successes in specialized circumstances and in particular schools, because they do not cast the net of school reform widely enough.

Clarence Stone has written about the intersection of public schools and city politics, and cautions that unique programs are not viable mechanisms for change because they are not “scaled up” into citywide efforts (Stone, 1998, p. 292). He also argues that even when these programs exist and are recognized at the district level, “there

is little in the school system itself to counter the tendency for education politics to be organized around employment issues and other bread-and-butter matters, such as contracting for new buildings and remodeling old ones” (2001, p. 139). He claims:

When educational matters reach the agenda, they tend to focus on the specifics of particular programs at specific schools. As an organizing goal, academic performance occupies a very weak position unless strong and deliberate efforts are made to build a special base of support for such a purpose (Stone, et al., p. 139).

Stone’s conclusions provide an important summary of challenges for bringing about substantive improvement in urban education. The racial, economic, and political divisions in any urban community make school reform a difficult undertaking. Education policy is often set with the impetus to raise student achievement, but without a mechanism for bringing disparate groups together to build collaborative relationships and find common ground for their mutual interests. When assessing various tactics to overhaul urban education, Stone (2001) warns against the temptation to find a panacea. In this category he places “one-shot” efforts that focus reforms at the programmatic level—including pedagogical and professional development innovations. He also critiques universal reform efforts at the institutional level that aim to meet the challenges facing city schools:

By emphasizing market forces, like vouchers and charter schools, or emphasizing the decentralization of authority within the public sector, with school-based decision making, or worse yet emphasizing the centralization of accountability and authority by instituting and aggressively enforcing state standards.... One-shot approaches are unlikely to suffice as a means of instituting sustained reform, and under some conditions may actually make things worse (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 142).

It is true that any of the blanket solutions listed above is untenable for sustaining systemic reform in public education. History has proven that quick-fix approaches, even at the institutional level, will not change urban schools. A mechanism is needed to realign relationships among groups based on feelings of trust, reciprocity, “and a pragmatic orientation toward give and take”(Stone, et al., 2001, p. 167).

Civic capacity, or the ability build coalitional partnerships to achieve civic mobilization and address community needs, is one way to address these concerns by cultivating future leaders with processes designed:

To prepare for a radical improvement in social investment in our youth, we can settle in for the long run without shaving down our goals; we can accept small advances without limiting ourselves to baby steps (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 168).

The construct of Embedded Social Action is vehicle for agency and educational praxis as stepping-stones to civic capacity. SAC uses these tools to mobilize by building effective collaborations as a guide to community development. Its pedagogy is based on research, writing, and validating local knowledge. Its social justice work is based on participatory action, neighborhood development and community building. Together these activities provide a conceptual map of Embedded Social Action (See Figure 6.a).

These are the strategies that should be used to build community first at the “invisible level” and scaled up to the visible level to physically building neighborhoods through housing, economic development, and community planning. Without making significant investments in human development, sustainable community development is impossible. Small-scale activity that is embedded in interlocking spheres of democratic

action is the bridge that contemporary community development practice needs to be effective in distressed neighborhoods. As Healey (1997) says of the processes of collaborative planning:

The radical transformation introduced by the social learning tradition is the recognition that the knowledge developed in group work is not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but is actively being produced through social interaction and social learning (Healey, 1997, p. 256).

In order to examine the possibilities that this method holds for education and empowerment, let us turn to the question of accountability that presents some of the greatest political dilemmas facing educational policymakers today.

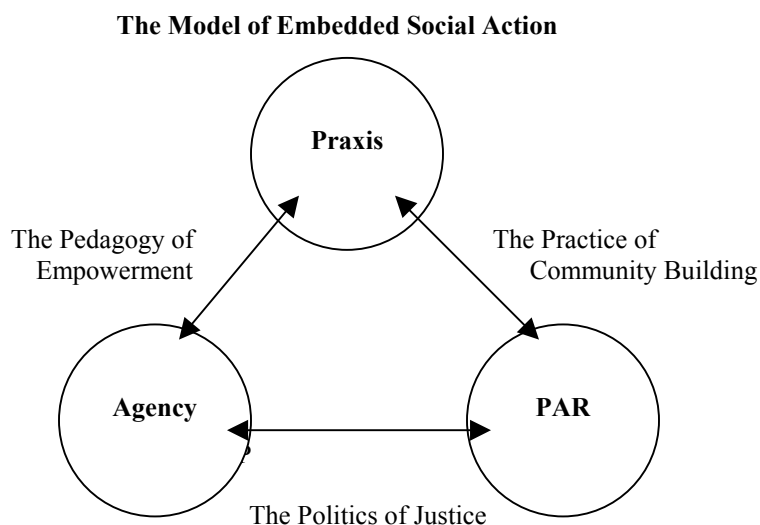


Figure 6.a

Embedded Social Action and the Issue of Accountability

This study of Students at the Center challenges the notion that teachers and tests are solely responsible for the success of education reform in two significant ways. First,

though an accomplished teacher created the program, it was done with co-authorship and planning of students, and the fundamental understanding that community partnerships were needed to make it sustainable. Without the support and active participation of an expansive network of educators and local organizations, SAC could not exist in its current form. As the Students at the Center program grew, additional teachers joined the network. They came with a range of backgrounds, academic interests, and years of experience. Many of these teachers were not born and raised in New Orleans nor were they veteran teachers in their school site.⁹ The common thread among them as educators was the structure for collaboration, collective problem solving, and community engagement the SAC program provided. The significance of this approach is that teachers were not expected to carry the sole burden for high student achievement and successful learning.

Secondly, none of the teachers were forced to use a standardized curriculum to prepare their students for the LEAP test. Instead they were encouraged to develop curricula relevant to student experience and interest, and to adopt a method of teaching and learning for empowerment through Embedded Social Action. This kind of reflection and community involvement was expected of students, regardless of their previous level of academic achievement. The young people in SAC courses were not all honors students or gifted writers. In fact, school culture and past experiences with schooling seemed to dim any interest in classroom work that many of the students once had.

⁹ At some schools there have been high turnover rates for teachers and principals. In the ten schools that offer SAC courses, there are currently six teachers who are teaching in a public school for the first time. Even teachers with some experience have moved around specifically to teach SAC classes, either as one or two sections of a full school day, or as a special elective teacher who is contracted by the New Orleans Public School system. In both cases, teachers receive fifty percent of their salary from grant funds and fifty percent from matching funds from the schools' budget. At present there are eight SAC teachers that are working at least part-time in a new school to teach with Students at the Center.

Openness and self-expression were the defining measures of the learning experience for students in the SAC program, not their degree of writing proficiency. Bob Tiller, a writing teacher at McMain magnet school for 14 years, says that he saw the most development “not in the stellar students who would shine under any circumstances, but with the more reserved students who normally get less attention and feedback on their work.” For students to develop academically they had to participate as members of an engaged community of learners; for teachers to employ a praxis of emancipatory education they had to create school spaces “to develop an agenda for examining social issues that youth may be unlikely to address on their own” (Weis and Fine, 2000, p. 232).

Still, it is important to note that even under ideal conditions—where teachers have the support of community members and students are engaged in using their education for empowerment—Students at the Center faces the problem that is endemic to public education policies. Reform initiatives too often equate learning with employable skills and a consumerist pursuit of “school choice” for individualistic goals (Miron, 1996). Under these structural conditions, substantive democracy is shunned as a matter of systemic policy and is replaced with piecemeal institutional practices that do not contest the social regulation of urban schooling, or the sources of oppression that it codifies. Schools are held accountable to standardized tests, not to the contributions they might make to their communities. Students are categorized by their test scores and not by their potential for development and critical thinking.

This narrow conception of educational accountability marginalizes teachers and students as agents of school improvement, and ignores community involvement in school reform decisions. All of a city’s resources must be brought to bear on the undoing of

injustice, and urban schools are a natural starting point to begin the task of social reconstruction. There is not a universal shortcoming among educators that creates the inability of students to meet academic standards. What hinders urban education most is the constraint of systemic inequality that isolates students and limits their participation in activities to improve their communities and schools.

Embedded Social Action and the Issue of Sustainability

In urban communities, public policy and history reflect the nature of race, gender and class inequalities, and the extent to which these issues arise in our manifold social institutions (Manning and Ritzdorf, 1997). Schools are rife with initiatives and reform tactics that are used to respond to stakeholder interests. The problem is not one of lack, but the lack of coordination. As Paul Hill (2000) points out:

Leadership must come from a longer-lasting sources (than school districts) and one that is both more deeply rooted in the community than a superintendent and less protective of the status quo than a school board or district office (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 150).

If education practices are to substantively contribute to community development, the learning process itself must make explicit connections between the socio-economic, political and cultural forces that construct urban communities. These realities, and their effect on neighborhood housing, social services, and living wage jobs will determine the fate of young people living in the inner city, and the development of young people will in turn determine the fate of urban America.

To do build a movement for social change, community-based initiatives must provide the space for inclusive place-based collaborations to empower the disenfranchised. I believe that the approach offered by the SAC program positions public

education as a key player in the matrix of inputs that shape holistic community development. My findings demonstrate that public education can and should play a significant role in developing the leadership needed to bring about social change. As Henry Sanoff (2000) claims:

Community development and youth development are inextricably related because both hinge on the basic health of the functions of family and citizenship.... By making a place for youth in community participatory processes, they will be empowered to make their unique creative contributions. Young people need to participate as equal partners in making decisions about their environmental futures (p. 18-19).

Schools are fundamental institution for civic life, and hold a crucial place in the process of social reconstruction. Without learning how to study and understand macro-structural forces, the disenfranchised will continue to lack the capacity to develop their communities in the way that they choose (Young and Subban, 1996; Mayer, 1994). Embedded Social Action can educate and empower students in urban schools to engage in shaping their communities and develop into future leaders.

Students at the Center shows that many resources for this work already exist in various institutional contexts, and with new forms of collaboration these fragmented resources can be magnified (Healy, 1997, p. 245). Through my participation with SAC, I saw that it is possible to create these spaces *in public schools* and teach young people to see themselves as valuable resources that are needed carry community development work forward. Adriane Frazier claims that possibility is an invaluable motivator for students:

When you are around people who are content with whatever situation that they are in it just hurts because they you feel like, 'What can anybody do?' Now I see that there are so many things that need to be done. And there are so many issues out there, that people are going to have to come together and fight about, and just

raise hell. And you do it whatever way you can, but if you don't feel the drive, or see the need, you aren't going to do anything. In my years with SAC we would be in class, and people would get riled up, and start asking, "How can we help, what can we do about this?" Then they would want to put things into action and get the ball rolling. I wanted to be around that, and I liked being in the center of that. It was very liberating and it upped my drive even more. I like to be around when there is revolution, when there is enlightenment happening. I just like the energy of it.

Stone and the co-authors of *Building Civic Capacity: The Politics of Reforming Urban Schools* (2001) argue that understanding what motivates people to act in a given community defines their priorities for cooperation on civic issues. I agree with Stone that the decision making that goes on in and around urban schools must be contextualized in the politics of a local community. I also add that examining the world from the perspective of students, teachers and other community members is essential for developing diversified practices of community building and coalitions that democratically pursue social justice.

School reforms that do not light a fire in students to try harder and spark an interest in learning will never raise achievement scores over the long term. Urban education policies that isolate teachers from one another, and encourage schools to distance themselves from community issues are also doomed to a revolving door of education programs du jour, where reform efforts are adopted and abandoned (Stone, 2001). I contend that *Students at the Center* has shown success in arenas that current state education policy cannot. SAC offers an alternative paradigm for public education that rests on student development and community empowerment that can be constructed only through the process of collaboration and coalition building. Without these

foundational principles public education will not be successfully reformed and community development will not be sustainable.

After observing SAC collaborations first-hand, I saw the need for political and scholarly work that paints an imaginative picture of community building that includes schools in the inventory of neighborhood resources. In every setting where I had occasion to speak about my research, I described the process and purpose of this work as a simple approach with a multitude of iterations. At universities hosting the American Collegiate Schools of Planning, the American Educational Research Association, and the Race, Gender and Class conference, I had the opportunity to represent the philosophy of social transformation to which Students at the Center subscribes.

In each instance I was reminded that the kind of Embedded Social Action that I was witnessing as a participatory researcher is all too rare in any public institutional setting. The disciplinary and institutional barriers used to separate social phenomena into discrete units belie the interconnectedness of lived experience. To truly develop a community, new structures of collaboration and mutuality must be built into the way that we think, plan and act as a society.

When talking with Jim about the future of the program, he admits that soft money for innovative projects like this one may eventually dry up. But he also believes that the work that students have produced and the networks that have been built are the basis for community improvement. “If we aren’t able to institutionalize this, on some level we have failed,” he told me when talked about the to need to formalize connections between the classroom and the community. As Jim perceives it, now the task of SAC is to build on its successes led by a mandate from the network of groups that support the program.

The inroads that were made by the partnerships with the school district are important, but if other community development organizations and nontraditional funders are willing to invest in schools, Students at the Center can become truly embedded in the community it serves and “combine social, economic, and physical planning by creating programs that treat whole persons rather than parts, in such areas as employment, education, health, social services, recreation, crime, and housing” (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 1998, p. 151).

Final Thoughts: Education and Activism for Empowerment

The path to social reformation is a long slow road. But when students describe their work as a “guerilla use” of video, radio and writing, I cannot forget all activists and educators who told me that do not know of any other school-based program that uses media, or engages in social justice work the way that SAC does. But in the sites where SAC was not well integrated into the school culture, or existed as a “special thing” that only happened one or two classes a day, the results were mediocre. Like all attempts at participatory action, Students at the Center did not function unless it was embraced, enlivened and implemented by members of the community. In sites where partnerships floundered, tough decisions had to be made about whether the resources of the program could be better utilized by redirecting them to schools and neighborhoods that had the vision and tenacity to collaborate in schools, and with students each day. The kind of grassroots work that SAC is built upon must be maintained daily to build a momentum, to motivate participants, and to strengthen a sense of hope and possibility in the community.

In the absence of a coalition of diverse stakeholders that are willing to do that work, no attempt at community development will be successful over the long term.

In my work with Students at the Center, I learned from and contributed to the program's methodology for collaboration. It is this activity, of participation and partnership, that I argue is an authentic example of education for liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) was the first to introduce this process and call it praxis—a tool used to combat oppression with a model of teaching and learning that enacts change through collective forms of insurgent agency (McLaren, 1995). SAC exemplifies this merging of participatory research and active learning, which has powerful implications for schools and widespread social reform. The philosophy of education as a tool to empower illuminates the contributions that programs like Students at the Center can make through Embedded Social Action and is worth quoting at length:

Empowering education offers students self-development in a cooperative and critical process. To think critically in this framework means to examine deep meanings, personal implications, and social consequences, of any knowledge, theme, technique or material. Critical thought on any subject reveals its internal structure and its connection to self and society. This in-depth scrutiny is also research. In this sense, research implies detailed investigation, an extensive exploration of subject matter, thought and language... Classroom and community research is the key to this approach (Shor, 1992, p. 169).

The concepts that provided the initial direction of this inquiry were stretched and broadened by the collaborative work of New Orleans public school teachers and students as they partnered with local residents, and educators around the nation to overtly bridge academic and activist domains. The students, teachers and community members that I encountered have diverse personal experiences, ethnic backgrounds, racial identities and

socio-economic realities. In spite of these differences, I believe the collective praxis, agency, and participatory research encouraged the formation of trust and cooperation among them.

Social theorists have called this “civic capacity” and “social capital” or “human agency” that is used to mobilize people for action on shared ideals. The participants in this study simply called their efforts collaborative work for community improvement. It is important to prioritize community voices, and their self-definitions, as we look for ways to improve urban schools and build a just society. In that struggle, we must think about communities in comprehensive terms, and think of the goals of education as societal goals. In urban school districts, progressive planners and municipal officials should be involved in these collaborations and coalitions that build power at the neighborhood level. For those committed to community development based on the principles of participation, equity and social transformation, the stakes are too high to limit our vision and overlook opportunities for social learning in all aspects of public life.

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VITA

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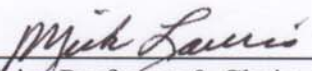
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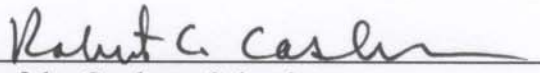
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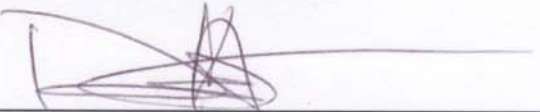
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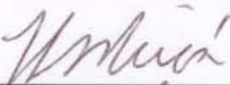
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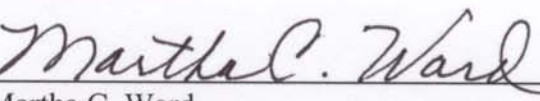

Major Professor & Chair - Mickey Lauria

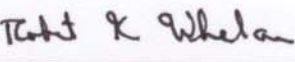

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